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COVER: Fissures of the Breeze, *by Luis Royo. RIGHT:* The Hobbit: The Expulsion, *by Donato Giancola. BELOW:* I-Roy, *by Lawrence Northey. See Gallery beginning on page 64.*

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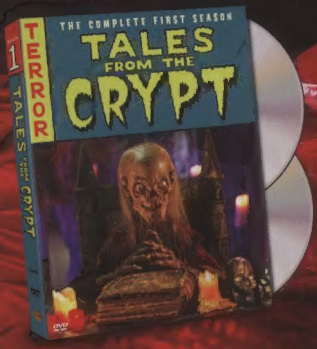

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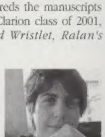
contributors

AMY BETH FORBES Amy Beth Forbes is sweating behind a keyboard in metro Phoenix in a studio apartment while her Siamese cat Jean Luc gleefully shreds the manuscripts that lay scattered at her feet. Amy is a member of the notorious Clarion class of 2001, and her fiction has appeared in *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, Ralan's Spectravaganza, Kiss Machine*, and other publications of ill repute.



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STAR WARS
TRADING CARD GAME

By Resa Nelson

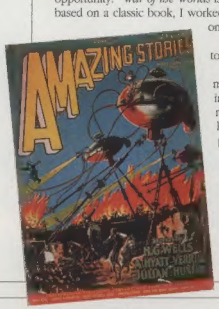
A fantasy classic finds new life on the silver screen.

When Miranda Otto (*Two Towers, Return of the King*) was in drama school, she and her classmates had a running joke. They'd laughingly greet each other by saying, "Steven Spielberg called for you." After playing Eowyn in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Otto shouldn't have been surprised when Spielberg really did call for her, asking her to play Tom Cruise's estranged wife in the science-fiction horror film, *War of the Worlds* scheduled for release on June 29 from Paramount Pictures.

Ironically, Otto was in the early stages of her first pregnancy at the time. She hadn't told anyone about her pregnancy and assumed she wouldn't get the role because of it. "Wasn't that my luck?" Otto says about the timing of Spielberg's call. But when she told him about her condition, Spielberg didn't bat an eye. Instead, he adjusted the script to accommodate Otto by making the character she plays pregnant. In fact, when shooting first began, Otto's stomach was padded to make her look farther along in her pregnancy than she actually was. She remembers looking at herself wearing the extra padding and thinking, "Gosh, that'll be me!"

Comparing the characters she plays in *War of the Worlds* and *Lord of the Rings*, Otto says, "Eowyn is younger and more spirited than the character I 'play in *War of the Worlds*, who is primarily a mother and has moved on to the next stage of life. She represents responsibility and the love of children—that side of humanity."

Although Otto's part is smaller than the role she played in *Lord of the Rings*, she jumped at the opportunity. "*War of the Worlds* is a huge project, and it's flattering to be a part of it," she says. "It's based on a classic book, I worked with terrific actors—there's nothing not to like. I don't think anyone would turn it down."



TOP: Tom Cruise stars as Ray Ferrier, a derelict father caught up in an alien invasion. ABOVE: Smoldering wreckage surrounds Ray Ferrier as he walks the streets of a destroyed New Jersey suburb. BELOW: The cover of the August 1927 issue of Amazing Stories *depicts the horror of Wells's story.*

But when asked about the movie's plot, Otto laughs. "I didn't get to read the script. I only got to read my part."

Otto says keeping a lock-down on details is becoming more common in Hollywood. One reason is, thanks to the ease with which information can be shared via technology, too many secrets are revealed before movies are released. Filmmakers are fighting to keep their work from being spoiled for audiences by taking steps to protect it—such as, not letting actors read the script.

"It's a different way of working," Otto says. "It requires more trust." Fortunately, she found it easy to place her trust in Spielberg and her fellow actors. "Steven's a family man, and Tom's a real gentleman." Without a full knowledge of the script, Otto had to let Spielberg guide her through the process by telling her what he needed from her in each scene. Even so, Otto sometimes found herself getting insider scoops from the young actors who play her children during shooting. "I got vague glimpses of things," she says.

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REVENGE OF THE SITH

A pregnant Miranda Otto stars as Ray Ferrier's estranged wife.

Screenwriter David Koepp (*Secret Window*, *Spider-Man*) can't talk about the script in detail, but he's willing to reveal his intentions. His goal in writing the *War of the Worlds* screenplay was to stay as faithful as possible to the original novel by H.G. Wells. "Over the years there have been a lot of movies that have taken ideas from his book," Koepp says, "but no one has ever really done the book itself."

Wells's classic tale is about a sudden and successful invasion of Earth by Martians. Set in the late 1800s, the story begins when astronomers notice flare activity on the surface of Mars, followed soon thereafter by a cylinder crashing like a falling star into the English countryside. A small crowd of people surround the strange object. Monstrous creatures soon emerge from the cylinder.

Aware of the strange flares observed by scientists, the novel's unnamed narrator quickly concludes these creatures are Martians. Highly evolved, they're almost all head and no body. At first, the narrator believes it's impossible that they can pose any real threat, because the force of gravity on Earth is three times what it is on Mars. He thinks the Martians are too heavy and awkward to do any harm. But they fire on the crowd with heat-ray guns, burning people to a crisp.

The Martians busily get to work building 100-foot-tall three-legged machines. Once built, the Martians wear them like metal suits and use them to walk across England. The British military sends out its troops, but the Martians make quick work of them.

The narrator escapes. He races home to his wife and sends her to safety in another town, then spends the rest of the novel trying to find her as the Martians quickly destroy and control England. While telling his story, he fast-forwards to pass along his brother's eye-witness account of the Martian invasion of London that he tells once the war is over and the brothers have reunited.

The narrator himself is caught in the chaos of evacuations, then trapped with an artillery man in a house wrecked by a nearby Martian landing. Terrified by the proximity of the aliens, the two men struggle to survive and stay hidden until the Martians build their three-legged machines and move on.

"I think it's very element," Koepp says about the story. "The big struggles of life do come down to elemental things. Every scene has to be about water, food, heat, survival."

Koepp has moved the action forward to the present day. No longer set in England, the story now takes place in the United States. "What I thought was the most successful aspect of the book—what makes it really extraordinary—is that it's from one character's point of view. There's that lengthy section where he talks about his brother's experiences in London, but that's the only time he steps out for any kind of global point of view, and I also think it's the least interesting part of the book.

"I thought, everybody who makes movies about this sort of subject matter tends to use the brother-in-London type idea: the big city smashed to smithereens," Koepp says.

Koepp had no interest in following that model. Instead, he took his cue from Wells, noting his game plan for the screenplay: "Let's limit our point of view and tell it from the point of view of one guy instead. What it becomes about more directly is someone who has failed at most things in his life, including, most significantly, being any kind of capable father."

That one guy is Tom Cruise, who plays Ray Ferrier. Koepp says, "It's fun to write for a movie star, because when you get the star you get that persona. And you can either work with that persona or fight against it, and I thought it might be fun to fight against it.

"Tom has always played really capable characters. They're really super-confident guys or really good at what they do, especially early in his career. And I thought, what if you took the guy from *Top Gun*, and let's say he was thrown out of the Air Force because he had a drinking problem, and his life went into a tailspin. What would he be like 15 years later? Or the guy from *All The Right Moves*, if he blew his shoulder and never became a professional athlete—what's he going to be like? I started from there. I think actors like that because they like to be challenged and do different things."

"He's this derelict father," Koepp says about Cruise's role in *War of the Worlds*. "His kids don't see him very often and don't like it when they do see him. Their mother drops them off for the weekend, which nobody is particularly happy about—and wouldn't you know, that's the weekend when the aliens invade. So he has to get his kids back to their mother—and in the process, not get them killed. The story is not about saving the Earth, it's about saving your own life."

Self-preservation was in the psyche of the British when Wells wrote *War of the Worlds*, first as a nine-part series in *Pearson's* Magazine in 1897, then in book form in 1898. At that time, the British Empire felt it was under constant threat from Germany, and an invasion of London seemed imminent. After all, the Germans were the masters of the zeppelin, silent and massive airships that were eventually used to bomb Europe. Wells purposely set the action of his story in real locations, banking on readers to recognize them and identify with the story as it unfolded.

Forty years later, actors and producers Orson Welles and John Houseman broadcast a radio play based on *War of the Worlds* and adapted by Howard Koch, who moved the action to the New York area. Like Wells, Koch set the action in real locations, beginning with the first Martian landing in Grovers Mill, New Jersey.

On the night of October 30, 1938, the radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds* caused a nation-wide panic when an estimated 1.7 million people believed the play was a real news broadcast.

A chain of events set the stage for panic. In 1938, radio was the main source of news and entertainment. Just as when Wells had written his novel, self-preservation was on everyone's mind. Hitler was disrupting Europe, and it wasn't unusual for a radio entertainment program to be interrupted with a news flash. In the previous year, the Hindenberg was the first disaster to be reported live on radio. Many Americans absorbed whatever they heard on the radio as gospel truth.

Keenly aware of this, the then-23-year-old Orson Welles re-shaped Koch's draft of the radio play into something chilling. The radio play became a series of news flashes that

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Run! A crowd of extras tears through a New Jersey neighborhood during filming

periodically interrupted a fake radio program of dance music

War of the Worlds was broadcast as an episode of the Mercury Theater, a weekly series on CBS radio whose ratings were consistently low. One of the problems was, it was broadcast at the same time as the "Must Hear Radio" program of its day, NBC's Chase and Sanborn Hour, starring ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and his dummy, Charlie McCarthy. At 8:00 PM most people were listening to Bergen and McCarthy, while Welles announced his program was a work of fiction, not a news broadcast. Twelve minutes later Bergen and McCarthy were relieved by a singer—and millions of listeners channel surfed until they stumbled upon *War of the Worlds* at the point in the play where a news flash reported the first Martian landing in Grovers Mill.

About Welles's radio play, Koepp says, "The genius of that was, again [as in the novel], the denial of information and the limited point of view. You've got the radio announcer telling you a few things, and then they'd cut back to the orchestra playing. And any time you have that limited amount of information coming across, it's just going to make you lean forward in your seat and try to find out more.

"Point of view and limited information is something Steven has done so brilliantly his whole career."

If you hear the radio play, it's easy to understand why listeners panicked. There's the on-the-spot reporting of the Martians emerging from their ship, which includes the panicked reactions of "onlookers." The "reporter" claims it's the most terrifying event he's ever witnessed. (The actor who played the reporter studied a recording of the previous year's Hindenberg disaster to get the tone right.) When the Martians fire their heat rays, victims scream, then the field report stops abruptly. It's only after several very long moments that the broadcast continues, and that's with a report of many deaths at the hands of the Martians: a declaration of martial law from the governor of New Jersey, and eye-witness accounts.

It's skin-prickling stuff.

While most Americans swallowed the Martian invasion story, others believed it was really the Germans or the Japanese who were invading the United States—they

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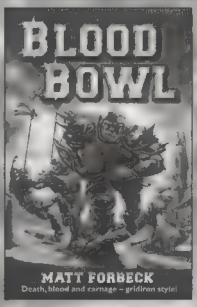

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thought the reporters were confused and only thought they were seeing Martians People jumped in their cars with the intent of evacuating their homes, headed for the highways, and ended up stuck in gridlock Others wandered the streets, interrupted church meetings to announce the world was ending, or called their loved ones to say good-bye A fire chief in a town near Grovers Mill spent the night investigating non-existent fires that people reported in the woods, believing they were seeing an after-effect of the Martians' heat-ray guns (There were no fires—just a lot of overactive imaginations.) Grovers Mill residents who lived across the street from a water tower suddenly thought they were seeing a 100-foot-tall Martian walking on three legs in the dim of night—so they fired their shotguns at it Fortunately, the water tower survived

The next day, Orson Welles had a lot of explaining to do, even though he'd made four announcements during the play to remind listeners it was just fiction *War of the Worlds* made world-wide headlines for several days, until people eventually decided it had provided a good eye-opener, especially since no one was killed in the panic and injuries were minor. People considered questioning everything they heard on the radio instead of assuming it to be absolute truth

Although this had been Koch's first professional job, he soon landed in

Despite WOW being a "disaster" movie, Spielberg claims it will be told as a single-person narrative—sticking closely to H.G. Wells's original story.

Hollywood—his next job was writing the screenplay for *Casablanca*, for which he won the Oscar in 1944 Welles accepted a multi picture deal with RKO and went on to direct and star in *Citizen Kane*, winning the Oscar for Best Screenplay in 1942

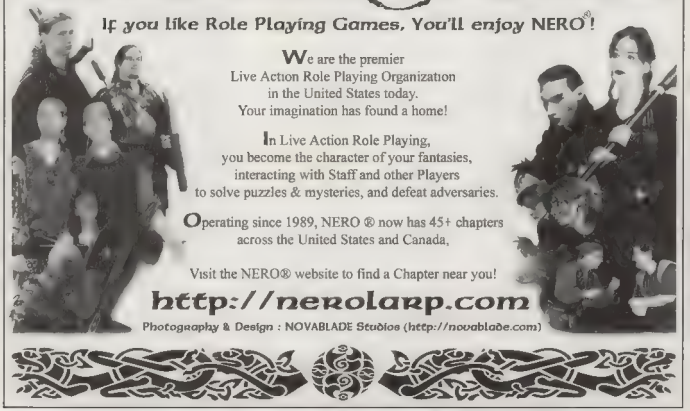
H G Wells was less than impressed with the radio broadcast, because he felt he'd been bamboozled—he claimed his understanding was that his novel was to have been read word-for-word on the radio, not adapted However, he changed his tune when sales of his then-little-known book skyrocketed

The novel also inspired a TV series on Fox (1988-90), as well as a London rock opera that starred Richard Burton as the narrator Although many movies have borrowed aspects from of *War of the Worlds*—including *Mars Attacks!* and *Independence Day*—only one other attempt has been made to film the original novel, half a century ago

"Religion became really important in the movie they did in the 1950s." Koepp says "which was sort of about a fear of Communist invasion And I think God became important in that movie because the idea was, 'Well, we'll prevail because we believe in God and the Communists don't—that's why we're going to do well.' That wasn't of interest to me because the parental issues and the survival issues were more important."

While Spielberg's movie is likely to stay true to the spirit and ideas of Wells's novel, at the same time it promises to be the polar opposite of popular disaster movies, thanks to the advantages of sticking to Wells's single narrator "It's a more effective and personal way to see big, global events through the point of view of one person," Koepp

Continued on page 88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Summer Fantasy Film Preview

By Chris R. D'Amore

Fantasy and horror fans should have plenty to keep them busy this summer. Here's a sampling of what to keep an eye out for

June 24— ***Bewitched*** (Columbia) In what might seem like a somewhat quirky pairing, Nicole Kidman and Will Ferrell come together in the cinematic version of one of

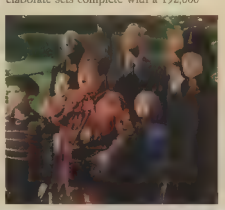
TV's most well-known sitcoms When a big-time movie star (Ferrell) gets involved in a re-making of the classic TV series he slowly finds out that his co-star may not just be "playing" a witch Also stars, Jason Schwartzman, Michael Caine, and Shirley MacLaine

June 24— ***Land of the Dead*** (Universal) In the spirit of *Night of the Living Dead* comes a new film directed by George Romero himself. Set in a modern-day world where the dead roam an uninhabited wasteland, the living attempt to seal themselves away in the confines of a heavily fortified city The city, however, is on the brink of anarchy with the rich having taken to highrises and the poor being left to fend for themselves in the chaos below. Outside the city walls the dead are evolving In a cast featuring Dennis Hopper, Simon Baker, John Leguizamo, and Asia Argento, the city's fate is left in the hands of a small group of mercenaries who must defend the city not only from itself, but the growing threat outside its walls

July 8— ***Dark Water*** (Touchstone) Director Walter Salles has assembled a stellar cast for this psychological thriller about a divorced mother (Jennifer Connelly) who faces a supernatural menace in her NYC apartment A remake of what was originally a Japanese horror film, this will be Salles first English language feature Additional cast members include John C Riley, Tim Roth, and Pete Postwaithe

July 8— ***Fantastic Four*** (Twentieth Century Fox) Based on the popular Marvel comic book, a mission into deep space takes astronauts Reed Richards, Ben Grimm, and Sue and Johnny Storm through a strange cloud formation The four come back to Earth with superhuman abilities and a major case of identity crisis The cast includes Jessica Alba, making her second appearance in a comic book based movie this year after *Sin City*

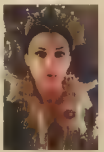
July 15— ***Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*** (Warner Bros.) Most who are familiar with the 1971 film and book by Ronald Dahl, might assume this to be yet another remake. They may also, however, be wrong Directed by Tim Burton the upcoming feature stars Johnny Depp in this his fourth collaboration with Burton The film is reported—unlike its 1971 counterpart starring Gene Wilder—to stick closely to Dahl's original work, promising to be quite dark and quirky With production costs reportedly reaching $120 million, don't be surprised to see elaborate sets complete with a 192,000 gallon river of fake chocolate, 15,000 square feet of imported grass, and five squirrels running amok



July 22—***The Island*** (Dreamworks) It would seem that this film is coming at just the right time Due to the ongoing controversy over stem cell research and cloning this film should have little trouble finding its audience Ewan MacGregor and Scarlett Johansson play Lincoln and

Jordan, two people who discover that they are actually cloned duplicates at a spare parts facility When they later end up on the run, expect plenty of action as the two discover the world around them for the first time—as adults

July 29— ***The Brothers Grimm*** (Dimension) From director Terry Gilliam (*Monty Python and the Holy Grail Brazil Time Bandits*) comes a film based on the German fairytale characters of William and Jacob Grimm The Grimms played by Matt Damon and Heath Ledger travel from village to village performing exorcisms and convincing townsfolk that they are protecting them from curses they concoct themselves Eventually the pair encounters a genuine curse and must rise to the occasion



Finally, what Summer movie preview would be complete without a wrap-up? Other films currently on our fantasy and horror radar this summer are ***Undead*** (Lions Gate,July 1) directed by the Spierig brothers and starring Felicity Mason, ***The Devil's Rejects*** (Lions Gate, July 22) with Rosario Dawson, William Forsythe, and Rob Zombie, ***The Skeleton Key*** (Universal August 12) with Peter Sarsgaard and Kate Hudson, ***Backwater*** (Dimension, August 26) with Bijou Phillips and Method Man ***The Cave*** (Sony, August 26) with Morris Chestnut and Piper Perabo, and ***The Woods*** (UA, Sept. 2) with Agnes Bruckner Bruce Campbell, and Patricia Clarkson

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By Heinz Insu Fenkl

Mythology and the most mysterious element.

Before undergoing his nightmarish punishment, Prometheus is chained to a great stone by Hephaestus, blacksmith of the gods.

It is said that Agni is the mouth of the gods Agni is Vishnu, the Creator. Within all creatures, he sustains the breath of life
—*The Mahabharata, Santi Parva*

The wrath of God burns against them, their damnation does not slumber, the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them, the flames do now rage and glow
—*Jonathan Edwards "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*

1. Matches

My first vivid memory of fire. I was five years old in Korea, living in a house that was once owned by a Japanese Colonel (whose ghost was said to linger there). My mother and her friends were playing flower cards in the middle of the room. It was a nice late-spring day; from where I sat on the floor, bored, I could see the solid blue sky outside the window.

It is a custom in Korea to bring matches when you first visit someone who has just moved into a new house, and we still had many fresh boxes of matches—large octagonal boxes jammed full of wooden match sticks all standing with their red heads pointing up. My mother and her friends all chain-smoked, and so there were plenty of matches being lit throughout the afternoon. They didn't notice when I lit a few myself by striking them against one of the eight walls of the matchbox. Everything was quiet, with only the regular slap of flower cards on the mat or the rustle of someone gathering up their winnings. The air was thick with blue-white smoke, a gentle breeze came through the window, letting us breathe.

As I lit another match, something came over me. That is the only way I can explain why I casually took the burning match and touched it to the top of the box, igniting the other 250 matches. I can still see how the flames exploded, very slowly—yellow, blue, red, white—releasing a white pillar of smoke straight upward until it hit the breeze from the window and spread, filling the entire room with a thick sulfurous stench that left us all coughing and choking.

I don't remember being punished for what I did that day, but I do remember that I felt a sort of awe at the power of that single match magnified 250 times. It made me respect fire even on those inevitable occasions when I played with it later in life.

2. Prometheus

Of the primordial elements, it is probably fire that remains the most mysterious and fascinating, even today. For the ancient Greeks fire was sacred, a divine substance whose power helped humans

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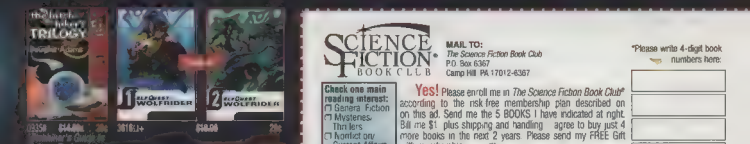

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Sea nymphs lament the death of Icarus in this work by Victorian artist Herbert James Draper.

distinguish themselves from (and hold dominion over) the animals who had received all of the physical gifts of the gods. For the Greeks the fire god, Hephaestus (Vulcan), was also the god of the forge, the holder of technology; but he, unlike the other gods, was ugly and deformed. The goddess of the hearth, Hestia (Vesta), was essential to each home, and her sacred flame could not be allowed to die. When a Greek colony was established, a burning coal from the mother city would be taken all the way to the colony to light its first hearth and establish a ritual connection to its motherland (this is the little-known origin of the Olympic torch ritual).

But the figure most closely associated with the meaning of fire is Prometheus, and the story of how fire came to humans is a profound narrative more resonant to us than the original cosmological creation myths because it involves the creation of humans. Thomas Bulfinch, in *The Age of Fable* (1913), writes:

> Before earth and sea and heaven were created, all things wore one aspect, to which we give the name of Chaos—a confused and shapeless mass, nothing but dead weight, in which, however, slumbered the seeds of things. Earth, sea, and air were all mixed up together; so the earth was not solid, the sea was not fluid, and the air was not transparent. God and Nature at last interposed, and put an end to this discord, separating earth from sea, and heaven from both. The fiery part, being the lightest, sprang up, and formed the skies, the air was next in weight and place. The earth, being heavier, sank below, and the water took the lowest place, and buoyed up the earth.
>
> Prometheus took some of this earth, and kneading it up with water, made man in the image of the gods. He gave him an upright stature, so that while all other animals turn their faces downward, and look to the earth, he raises his to heaven, and gazes on the stars.

Prometheus was one of the Titans, a gigantic race, who inhabited the earth before the creation of man. He and his brother Epimetheus were committed the office of creating man, and providing him and all other animals with the faculties necessary for their preservation. Epimetheus undertook to do this, and Prometheus was to overlook his work, when it was done. Epimetheus accordingly proceeded to bestow upon the different animals the various gifts of courage, strength, swiftness, sagacity, wings to one, claws to another, a shelly covering to a third, etc. But when man came to be provided for, who was to be superior to all other animals, Epimetheus had been so prodigal of his resources that he had nothing left to bestow upon him. In his perplexity he resorted to his brother Prometheus, who, with the aid of Minerva, went up to heaven, and lit his torch at the chariot of the sun, and brought down fire to man. With this gift man was more than a match for all other animals. It enabled him to make weapons with which to subdue them, tools with which to cultivate the earth, the ability to warm his dwelling, and the ability to introduce the arts and coin money— the means of trade and commerce.

Humans received from Prometheus, whose name means "forethought," the fundamental thing that distinguishes us from animals. Epimetheus, whom Edith Hamilton calls "a scatterbrained person who invariably followed his first impulse and then changed his mind," bears a name that means "afterthought," suggesting that the bringer of fire also brought with him a special kind of knowledge associated with the gods. (One of the major cognitive faculties that distinguishes us from most animals is the ability to plan ahead.)

Since this knowledge, and the technology of fire, was not initially meant for people, Prometheus had a high price to pay for his transgression and the anger he aroused in the gods. Zeus (Jupiter/Jove) has Prometheus chained to a rock on Mount Caucas to suffer eternal torment: an eagle comes down to rip out his liver and devour it—again and again throughout time because Prometheus' wound is magically healed after each incident. (In some versions of the story, it is a vulture that tears out his liver, and in later myths, Hercules releases him.)

Bulfinch says, "This state of torment might have been brought to an end at any time by Prometheus, if he had been willing, to submit to his oppressor; for he possessed a secret which involved the stability of Jove's [Zeus'] throne, and if he would have revealed it, he might have been at once taken into favor. But that he disdained to do. He has therefore become the symbol of magnanimous endurance of unmerited suffering, and strength of will resisting oppression." Hamilton notes that Prometheus' punishment is especially cruel because he had also swindled the gods of the good part of animal sacrifices by convincing them to take the fat and entrails of the burnt offerings, leaving the meat to the humans. (This is Hesiod's explanation for why the gods initially *took* fire from humans and why Prometheus stole it back.)

Prometheus is a tragic figure, a trickster, and a kind of savior figure who sacrifices himself for the good of humans. This makes him a Christ figure, and perhaps that is why he was a favorite subject of the Romantic poets and even appears in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The full title of Mary Shelley's timeless novel of science and hubris is *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*; she updates the

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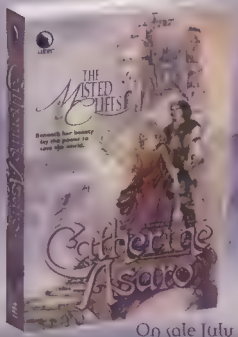

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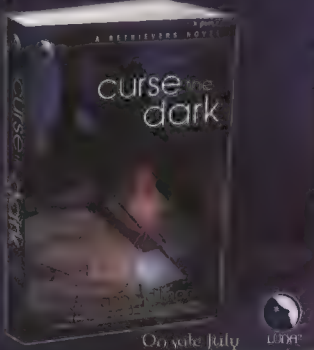

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technology from fire to electricity, but the theme is the same: men are not equipped to hold power over divine knowledge and technology

3. Fire Gods & Fire Bringers

Fire gods and goddesses are deeply-rooted in all ancient cultures, and their manifestations are quite diverse, but they all seem to share the quality of being associated with a form of wisdom beyond human understanding. The Hindu god of fire, Agni, for example, is worshiped as terrestrial fire (flame), heavenly fire (lightning), and divine fire (the sun). He is also an elemental figure along with other personified deities such as Varuna, the embodiment of air, but since Agni is the one linked to the ritual fire sacrifices, he has an especially prominent place in ancient Vedic myth. Indeed, his name is the first word in the ancient *Rig Veda*, the seminal Vedic text.

The Art Archive Musée Guimet Paris / Dagli Orti

Agni, the Hindu god of fire and the hearth, is portrayed in this 17th century wood carving

Why is Agni so important? He is, of course, immortal, and he has power over both humans and gods. He is reborn each day (like the sun), invoked through the use of the fire drill, which causes flame by the friction of his parental element, wood. The sparks from Agni's fire are the origin of stars. But most importantly, Agni is the embodiment of transformation. It is through him that the gods communicate with humans, and it is through him that humans are able to metabolize the food they eat. Thus, on the one hand, it is Agni's burning of sacrificial meat that transforms it into a message—smoke rising to the gods in heaven. On the other hand, he is what allows humans to digest their food by "burning" calories (a process we know to be literally true).

So important is Agni that other religious traditions refer to him to establish their own power. When the Buddha emerged in the 6th Century BC, one of his legendary deeds was to convert a group of 1,000 fire worshipping ascetics to his path: the Fire Sermon, delivered in Bodh gaya, is one of the canonical texts of Buddhism. A well-known symbol appropriated by the Buddhists (and later by the Nazis) is the swastika, which some scholars say originally represented the fire drill associated with Agni. (The image of fire being produced from a stick is reminiscent of the Prometheus myth, in which he is said to have brought the fire in a hollow fennel stalk.)

The Hawaiian goddess of fire is Pele, also known as the Goddess of a Thousand Names. She is associated with volcanoes, making her both a fundamentally creative and destructive figure. Volcanoes are literally the foundation for all terrestrial life in the Hawaiian Islands (one of Pele's names is "She Who Shapes the Sacred Land"), and yet their power can be terrifying and destructive to humans. Her dual nature also reveals itself in her physical appearance—she can be a beautiful young woman or an old hag, and when her anger is invoked, she becomes a flaming woman or the fire element itself. One of the legends regarding volcanoes under the protection of Pele is that bad fortune will follow anyone who removes so much as a rock from them. Each year, according to the National Park Service in Hawaii, thousands of tourists mail back volcanic rocks they had stolen from the parks, their initial skepticism apparently outweighed by Pele's curse.

Brigit, the Celtic goddess of fire, like Agni, is associated with three different and yet parallel aspects of fire: the hearth, the forge, and inspiration. She seems to combine the aspects of Hestia's hearth and Hephaestus' forge with Prometheus' connection to divine knowledge. Although she is a Pagan goddess, Brigit did not disappear when the Celts were converted to Christianity. She became St. Brigit, Jesus' foster mother.

In North America the story of the fire bringer often serves to explain the origins of other natural phenomena. According to the Choctaw, Grandmother Spider brought fire after the opossum, the buzzard, and the crow had failed. The story explains why the opossum, once known for his bushy tail, has a bare one; why the buzzard, once proud of its beautiful neck feathers, has a red and blistered head, and why the crow, once pure white with the most beautiful singing voice is now black and has a hoarse caw for a call—all because they were each burned as they failed in their attempts to bring fire. Grandmother Spider also taught people how to weave and how to make pottery out of clay.

In one variant of the Shasta story of how fire was stolen from the Fire Beings and brought to humans, the trickster, Coyote, disguises himself in an old blanket. He is found out by the Fire Beings when his blanket catches fire, and he runs away. The fire from the blanket is handed off from Coyote to Sparrow, to Cardinal, to Blue Jay, to Hawk, to Eagle, and then finally to Turtle, who takes the fire in his shell and submerges himself to escape the Fire Beings. Coyote chastises Turtle when he emerges from the river, telling him that water kills fire, but Turtle then produces the fire, which was safe in his shell, and he gives it to Wood so that it will be available to anyone who wants it. This story accounts for the origin of Turtle's tail as the remnant of the arrow the Fire Beings shot at him; it also explains (as in the Greek, Hindu, and Polynesian myths) why fire comes from wood.

In another variant, Coyote fools the Fire Beings who believe him merely to be a normal coyote. He steals the fire from the three Fire Beings while they are changing their watch over fire, and he hands the fire off to a series of small mammals until it eventually ends up with Frog. In this version of the story, Frog keeps the fire from the Fire Beings by giving it to Wood, from whom they do not know how to retrieve it. But Coyote, being the clever trickster that he is, knows a way to get fire back from Wood by rubbing two sticks together, and that is how humans got fire to keep them warm in winter.

In Polynesian mythology, it is the trickster figure Maui who brings fire to humans. According to W. D. Westervelt, the sun had sent the gift down to earth with his own son, Auahi-turoa, in the form of a falling comet. Auahi-turoa married Mahuika, a sister of the Dawn Maiden, and had five children with her—the Fire Children—whose names correspond to the five fingers of the hand. To get fire for humans, Maui appealed to Mahuika time and again until she relented and gave him one of the Fire Children by plucking it from her hand. Maui took it, but he destroyed it and came back to beg for another. He did this four times until Mahuika finally pulled off her last finger and hurled it at him in a fit of anger and it burst into flames that chased him. Maui called on

Further Reading

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Te Ihorangi, the Rain, to help him escape Fire, and a rainstorm came and doused the great flames. What remained of the fire escaped into the woods and found shelter in the kaikomako tree, whose wood the Maori use in their fire-making. So, for the Maori, the seed of fire is always in the sacred Fire Preserver, Hine-kaikomako.

The Maui story is particularly interesting because it includes elements of both the North American and the South Asian fire tales. On the one hand, Maui's role is nearly identical to that of Coyote in the Shasta and stories, but the detail of the Fire Children being the fingers of Mahuika recalls the origin of the Vedic fire god Agni, who "had ten mothers, who were the ten fingers of the hands." Westervelt also notes that the figure of Maui is assuredly the personified form of some phase of light, and so is connected with, or represents, life. In Polynesian concepts, light and life are closely connected. Apparently maui has, in the past, been a vernacular term for "life," or some similar meaning. A variant form, mouu, has the meaning of "life alive, to live." It is quite possible that there is connection between maui and mauri in this sense, for at Rotuma the latter term means "to live," while at Futuna tamauri means "life." One of the gods of Egypt representing light was Mouu.

For bringing fire to humans, Maui must suffer the vengeance of the gods. In one of his battles, Maui fights with the ex-Dawn Maid, the queen of the underworld, to gain eternal life for humans—but he loses. This recalls both the Promethian creation of humans and the fall from divine grace that the Biblical Adam and Eve suffer after eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. They become like gods, but they also lose the possibility of eternal life when God expels them from paradise—posting a guardian with a sword of fire to keep them out.

4. Consequences

Icarus plunges to his death because he flies too close to the flames of the sun. Even Phaethon, the son of Helios (Apollo) is not immune from the curse of fire, when he tries to drive his father's chariot, he burns both the heavens and the earth until Zeus strikes him dead with a thunderbolt (his mother and sisters are so distraught they are turned into poplar trees). In Christianity, the highest of the high and the lowest of the low are associated with fire—both the Holy Spirit and Hell are depicted as flames.

What is it that makes fire so distinct from the other elements? Water is formless and fluid, air is invisible, earth is both solid and malleable. But while the other elements are bound in the three states of matter—solid, liquid, and gas—fire is different. The ancients saw it as mercurial and capricious for its dynamic and ever changing nature; in modern physics we understand it as plasma—the fourth state of matter, which is an interstitial state, like energy bound in a semi physical form. Fire is all about transformation, and the mystery of how it consumes and purifies lends it a continuing and divine fascination to humans. (Kurt Vonnegut Jr., with his remarkably mundane wit, has one of his characters ruminate on the fact that the role of the fireman is to keep things from combining with oxygen. How logical, and yet how mysterious!)

In the same way that fire is a transitional thing, it keeps humans in that constant and dangerous state of fluctuation between their animal and divine natures. The Hindus called the spiritual force of Kundalini by the name of "serpent fire" as it rose from the base of the spine into the crown of the head, connecting one to the divine. At the same time, they understood that if the fire did not rise properly through the chakras, the result could be great suffering or the creation of a monster.

Fire is always double-edged. One of the great historical ironies is that the Great Fire of London in 1666 not only destroyed a major part of the city, it also brought an end to the Plague. When Emperor Nero "fiddled" while Rome burned in 64 AD, destroying two thirds of the city over the course of nine days, he wasn't just a madman oblivious to the problem. It was an opportunity for urban reconstruction. While many Christians saw the fire as the Apocalypse ushering in the return of Christ, they did not realize Nero would use them as a convenient scapegoat. The Hindu practice of sutee, or "widow burning" is simultaneously a display of spousal devotion—women who must be restrained from leaping into their husband's funeral pyre—and a convenient way of eliminating widows who prevent the transfer of property to men.

Fire also seems to have a symbolic sense of humor about it. The story of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 is that the O'Learys' cow started it when it kicked over a lantern. But according to Richard F. Bales, who researched historical documents and police depositions, the real culprit was probably a man by the name of Daniel Sullivan, whose nickname was "Peg Leg" because he had a wooden leg. It takes us back to the primal understanding that fire comes from wood. "Peg Leg" Sullivan walked on his own fennel stalk, accidentally invoking the fire of the gods.

As I was finishing this essay, I called my mother and asked her why she had not punished me for that time when I had ignited the entire box of matches. She recalled the incident, but then she reminded me that it was unnecessary to punish me—we had left one of our previous houses because it had burned to the ground. All they had been able to take with them were my diapers. "You remembered when you were little," she said. "How could you forget now? You're a professor."

I had no quick reply. But later, I realized that I had actually been recalling other images, namely those tragic ones that remain indelible, even when they do not come from personal experience. The image of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, sitting with such apparent calm as he burned himself to death in June of 1963. The self immolation of Korean student protesters, appearing in the news again and again in the late 1990s. The image of people leaping from the twin towers on the morning of September 11th, 2001. Fire has a visceral way of humbling us.

Exactly how important is the idea of fire in the western mind? That the control of fire is what distinguishes humans from animals? It may seem an academic point to us these days, but in the 19th century, when the British began to colonize Tasmania, this distinction was what provided the rationale for genocide. According to the settlers, the Tasmanian Aborigines were so incredibly primitive and backward that they had forgotten how to make fire. The Tasmanians were so primitive that they did not wear clothes even during the frigid winters, and yet they wore decorative fur capes and stoles around their necks. Other Aboriginal tribes also went mostly naked, but the Tasmanians had become no better than animals to the white settlers because, to compound their irrational nakedness, they had also apparently lost the ability to make fire. They had regressed so far down the evolutionary scale that they had to keep watch over burning sticks that were initially lit from natural fires. They could hardly be called human, and so they were displaced from their tribal lands and hunted for sport until they were, for all practical purposes, exterminated.

Irony of ironies. The Tasmanians knew how to make fire all along (recent examination of 18th century exploration journals document that they used fire drills), but it was their religious practice to stay as close to nature as possible; it was in obedience of their most sacred Dreamtime Law that the Tasmanian Aborigines willfully did not make fire. They had, in a sense, given back the gift of Prometheus so as not to pay its heavy price. I think they knew, in practice, that the use of fire was convenient for culture, but that in the end it only contributed to Entropy, what they used to call "The Heat Death of the Universe."

Heinz Insu Fenkl is the author of the mythic novel/memoir Memories of My Ghost Brother *(nominated for the PEN Hemingway Award) and the editor of* Kon. The Beacon Anthology of Korean American Fiction. *He lives with his wife and daughter in New Paltz, NY, where he teaches creative writing at SUNY. His previous Folkroots columns can be found on the Endicott Studio for Mythic Arts web site, www.endicott-studio.com.*

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By Gahan Wilson & Paul Witcover

Turning up the heat with the season's newest fantasy offerings.

Despite being one of the very best living writers of dark fantasy, the winner of a richly-deserved accumulation of awards and critical accolades, and the author of what must by now be a towering stack of published books, Ramsey Campbell recently found himself financially challenged enough to hire on at a British branch of a huge American bookstore operation.

The author of the little newsletter sent along with the reviewers' copy of ***The Overnight*** (Tor Books, NYC, trade hardcover, 396 pages, $24.95.) is careful to assure its readers that none of the characters working in the fictitious bookstore which is the locale of *The Overnight* resemble in any way those he worked with during his real life stretch as a bookstore clerk and I really do think that is a wise thing particularly since the real bookstore chain is named and since the employees in the fictitious one are as singularly wretched and unhappy a crew as one could hope never to meet and very sincerely pray never to be forced to work with

The editors at Wildside Press bring back the April 1933 issue of Weird Tails *magazine.*

The bookstore is located in the delightfully spooky version of the North of England which Campbell has created and made his own. It's placed in a really dreary retail park (British for shopping mall) which modern commerce has plonked down with a sneer in a remarkably foggy and probably squishy area known as Fenny Meadows, a dismal locale which—as an eccentric local historian is happy to point out—has been continuously associated with dark and highly ominous doings from Beowulfian times to our present, not particularly cheery, era

The store is a tentacle of "Texts," a huge American book-selling business which, having done a more than fair job of conquering huge slabs of the United States readership, has decided to see how well they can do in the way of stirring up a little loyalty amongst the bookishly inclined of Great Britain.

Unfortunately for the local talent hired to man and woman the store, "Texts" has seen fit to export one of their own from the great state of Minnesota, a fellow called Woody Blake, to run the place and Woody is the sort of American which sensible Americans abroad who are interested in getting along in a friendly fashion with non-Americans do their best not to emulate

Woody is a natural bully, for starters, and has doubtless made life miserable for many of his fellow citizens when living in his home country, but this trait has been exacerbated because it is pretty obvious—since he puts very little effort into hiding the tendency—that he regards Brits, as he calls them, to be products of an inferior if not downright pathetic society which has taught them all the wrong ways to run a profitable business.

He is a throw back, or possibly a continuation, of the missionary state of mind that has for centuries made life miserable for "natives" unfortunate enough to find themselves under the missionary's hand

It's not that the people working in the store don't very seriously need help, mind, as they most certainly do. All of them appear to live miserably unsatisfactory lives and thus has made them self-absorbed and cringingly defensive to the point where they almost reflexively do their best to make

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one another as unhappy as possible and increase the downward spiral into mutually induced isolation

All of Woody's attempts to pull mend these tendencies are doomed because they are worse than superficial, they are fake. He gives them all a nasty little pep talk on the positive power of smiling, for instance, but it has nothing to do with an honest attempt to cheer oneself up It is merely a short course on how to consciously manipulate and possibly mislead those unfortunates they are told to smile at

This would be hard enough for the poor things to bear by itself but it is made much worse by extremely creepy goings-on in the store and its environs like an undercurrent tugging at the legs of someone wading through a swamp Computers misbehave in even spookier fashion than yours do The icons blur and take on nonsensical forms if they don't vanish altogether; the recorded voice of the misbehaving elevator says odd things and now and then giggles; books neatly stacked a moment or so before are found spewed from their shelves. Book pages take on a most unpleasant dampness their illustrations morph, and many of these nasty and troubling events are unpleasantly accompanied by the spotting of gray, blurry things just before they duck behind a shelf or waddle into a patch of fog

Finally a macabre and fatal event shocks the wretched crew and even Woody himself enough to make them wonder if things at Fenny Meadows are going really seriously wrong but I won't tell you what it is and I suppose this is as good time as any to warn you that the blurb on the book's cover does, so don't read it as it will also spoil several neatly nasty little surprises Campbell has skilfully dreamed up for you

I can assure you, however, that things really and truly do get to be so horrible that no amount of smiling will accomplish anything whatsoever and that you will have a fine old time being upset and appalled by turns until . . . but I won't tell you that, either

The bottom line (as Woody might say) is that you really must buy this book, and all the other books of Campbell's you can get your hands on while you're at it. He's a good man and a fine author and I'm sure not a one of us wants to be responsible for his having to go back to work at a place like "Texts" on account of money.

Do it and—take my word for it—you'll find yourself wearing a great big smile in no time at all!

Black Blossom by Boban Knezevic, translated from the Serbian by Dragana Rajkov, Prime Books, Holicong, PA, hardcover, 160 pages: $29.95

I found this extraordinarily grim fantasy translated from the Serbian an odd and very interesting trip into a mindset not quite like any I've encountered directly before

Working your way through it is a little like traveling through a difficult and decidedly alien country without knowing all that much of the local language and being in the hands of a preoccupied guide you don't quite trust and who is clearly not all that concerned with your safety

It's a very dark and merciless variant of the faery saga. Jungian in the extreme, that tells the tale of a frightened knight on a confused and somewhat circular quest which the author very strongly emphasizes for the reader by having the book's chapters overlappingly move through its pages in opposite directions from rear to front and front back to rear

That is by no means the only aspect of this book that goes in opposite directions. It is a tale of a man stronger than any other living human who is constantly unsure and vacillating; regards super heroes and super villains as gaudy (in their dark and gloomy way) as any swaggerer in the Marvel Comics series but is clearly extremely dubious about the credibility of both heroism and villainy; and it seems to be arriving at a culmination of but then shyly passes by a boiling sexual joining of the hero and the beautiful Black Blossom of the title. And all of that's really light stuff floating on implications of vastly deeper contradictions

I must say I enjoyed the trip for all its discomforts and that it gave me more than a few fresh insights into a number of things including the world of sword and sorcery and day to day family life, and a somewhat deeper insight into why those Balkan disputes tend to be so extraordinarily bloody minded

The Book of Dreams by Catherynne M Valente, Prime Books, Holicong, PA, hardcover, 152 pages, $27.95

Another work from Prime Books, profoundly contrasting with their offering above, is *The Book of Dreams* by Catherynne M Valente Instead of an insecure macho hero as in Black Blossom, this story concerns a very, very old heroine, Ayako, who is, in spite of all, quite deeply content She has come to be a hermit living in an ancient, abandoned pagoda perched on the side of a mountain high above and profoundly isolated from the little town far below

The story of Ayako and her musings and insights and transformations is told in a series of really lovely prose poems which range from one to three pages and are well and most provocatively introduced by

The world of dew
Is the world of dew
And yet, and yet—
—Issa

Sometimes the poems are about I-Ayako, which is to say an old woman living in an abandoned pagoda, sometimes they are about the I within-Ayako watching the old woman or the dream of one or the other or both of them; sometimes they are about a Goddess such as Isis holding the chopped bits of her husband, Osiris But whoever or whatever they tell you they are told by I-that-is-Ayako

Many interesting characters pop up in the stories Some of them are human, some are animals, some are things, some are supernatural beings. There is River, there is Fox and Moth, there is the great red Torii Gate bent beneath the snow, there is the boy whose lot it is to bring her offerings and there is mountain weeping I think you'll find them all very helpful, each in their own, patient way

It's a lovely book I intend to read it many times

Weird Trails, The Magazine of Supernatural Cowboy Stories, April 1933 issue (a reproduction), Wildside Press, Holicong, PA, paperback, 122 pages, $19.95

A sad duty of a responsible book critic such as myself is to warn unwary readers when he or she uncovers questionable activities on the part of publishers which threaten to mislead or confuse those readers or even lead them morally astray and I deeply regret to say evidence of such activity has recently come to my attention

The people at Wildside Press have now and then allowed themselves to wander dreamily out onto the thinnest, most gossamer fringes of publishing respectability Heretofore I and other reviewers excused these excesses on the grounds of the child-like, almost charming naivete of Wildside's executives and editors, but their publication of the "Pulp Classic" (as they call it!) of the patently spurious April 1933 issue of *Weird Trails*, the *Magazine of Supernatural Cowboy Stories* goes too far and represents irresponsible magazine publication at its worst

True, the editors have researched back copies of *Weird Tales* magazine (the publi-

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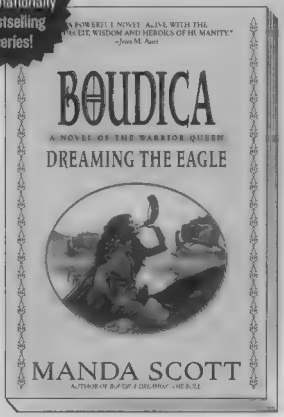
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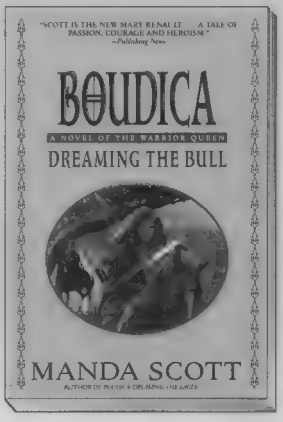
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cation upon which this shocking fraud is based) very carefully and one has to admit they have caught the favor of the innocent advertisements of a bygone era very well and satirized them quite cleverly (I have to candidly admit the full page ad for a book on THE TRUE STORY OF SEX is erotically amusing and perhaps even a touch arousing), that they have spared no expense in hiring such skilled writers as Ron Goulart, Craig Shaw Gardner, and P D "Tequila-Cured" Cacek among other luminaries, and I must confess that the way in which P D Wentcek's illustration for Will Murray's *"The Cow-Men of Coburn"* gives away the story's big surprise skillfully evoked many memories of such practices in the good old days of the real WT and gave me a little catch in the heart

So be warned

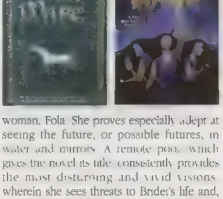
Gahan Wilson

The Dark Mirror, Book One of the Bridei Chronicles, Juliet Marillier,Tor Books, New York, hardcover, 512 pp. $27.95, ISBN 0-765-30995-5

Robert E Howard famously wrote of the Picts, a degraded race of savages led by a pure-blooded warrior-king, Bran Mak Morn, but the real Picts were a complex and sophisticated people, possibly related to the Celts, who inhabited much of northern Scotland until their kingdoms, and much of their culture, was wiped out by a succession of crushing defeats—military and otherwise—at the hands of the Vikings, the Catholic Church, and the neighboring Dalraidans, a Scots people of Irish origin. In *The Dark Mirror*, Juliet Marillier draws from the sketchy historical, archeological, and mythological record to tell the tale of Bridei, a young Pict of the sixth century being groomed for kingship by his druid mentor, Broichan.

The heart of *Dark Mirror* is the love story between Bridei and Tuala, a girl who has one foot in the world of humans and the other in the world of the fey. Bridei is taken from his parents at a young age and given to the stern Broichan as a foster son. Some years later, during the night of a full moon, he finds a baby girl on Broichan's doorstep. It is plain to the boy that she is other, but in his loneliness he convinces himself that she is a gift from the moon goddess, the Shining One, sent to be his companion. Broichan is absent at the time, and in the months before his return, Bridei uses Druid magic to ensure that the girl is accepted into the household. When Broichan finally meets Tuala, his first instinct is to banish her, foreseeing that no good can come from sheltering a fey child, but he restrains himself. He cannot discount Bridei's claim that Tuala is a gift from the Shining One, and as a pious man, with no desire to offend a powerful goddess, he relents and permits the girl to stay. But despite her many endearing and admirable qualities, he never comes to trust or even to like her.

As Bridei and Tuala grow up, their bond deepens, and their relationship gradually changes from that of brother and sister to something more, although they themselves are slow to understand this. Tuala's nature gives her an instinctive grasp of magic, and her talents in this direction are honed by Bridei, who teaches her some of the skills he is learning from Broichan and a wise-



woman, Fola. She proves especially adept at seeing the future, or possible futures, in water and mirrors. A remote pool, which gives the novel its title consistently provides the most disturbing and vivid visions, wherein she sees threats to Bridei's life and, in the form of other women, to her dreams of a shared life with him.

Broichan separates the two, afraid their closeness constitutes a threat to his long and meticulously conducted campaign to place Bridei on the throne. The current king is dying, and there are aspirants aplenty, some of whom will not stop at murder to gain power. A further threat to Broichan's ambitions for Bridei comes from the Pictish lands to the south, ruled by a Christian king who is sure to assert his own claim to the northern crown.

The Picts practiced human sacrifice, and Marillier shows the rite in all its horror while placing it within its cultural context, though I suspect the reality was more violent than the scene presents. Similarly, the psychological effects of the rite upon her characters seem filtered through modern sensibilities and morality. But then, perhaps she did not relish the challenge of creating sympathetic characters that are also enthusiastic practitioners of human sacrifice.

The Dark Mirror would have been a stronger book if Marillier had delved more deeply into the nature of the Shining One and the other gods and goddesses of the Picts, as well as the world of the fey. It soon becomes clear that faery powers are watching over Tuala, but unfortunately they function as plot devices rather than characters with lives and agendas of their own. It seems strange that a fantasy novel would pull back from fantasy, but this one does. It's as if the author shares something of Broichan's mistrust of the fey. Or perhaps it's simply that she did not want to introduce an element that might interfere with her portrayal of the love between Bridei and Tuala as a deeply human one. That choice marks *The Dark Mirror* as a romance novel, albeit one with fantastic trappings and a gritty historical underpinning.

The White Mare, The Dalraida Trilogy, Book One, Jules Watson, Overlook Press, New York, hardcover, 480 pp. $24.95, ISBN 1-58567-620-9

Set in Scotland some five centuries before the events of *The Dark Mirror*, *The White Mare* is another romance with a soupçon of fantasy. First time novelist Watson takes more historical liberties than her countrywoman Marillier, but fewer magical liberties.

Here we have a tale centering on the Dalraida. Irish invaders who carved out a kingdom in Scotland in the sixth century. Watson postulates an earlier incursion, around 80 AD, when an exiled prince of Eire, Eremon stripped of his rightful throne by a usurping uncle, flees to the shores of Alba with a loyal band of followers. There he falls in with a powerful tribe, the Epidii, whose king has just died, impressing his hosts, and their head druid, Gelert, with his martial prowess and gift of gab. Eremon is offered the kingship in exchange for a promise to help drive Roman invaders from the land. To cement the deal, he is married to the tribe's Ban Cré, Rhianne, a beautiful but emotionally scarred woman who is at once princess, priestess, and healer. Rhianne, who witnessed the brutal murders of her foster family, cannot bear the thought of physical intimacy with a man, and her union with Eremon begins as one of pure political expedience, with icy hatred on one side and bafflement on the other. Needless to say, this state of affairs does not continue unchanged, and *The White Mare* becomes yet another in a long line of romances to feature some variation of the line, "My God—I'm in love with my wife!"

Watson incorporates the groundbreaking (literally) archeological and anthropological researches of "archeomythologist" Marija Gimbutas, who, beginning in the 1960s, advanced the still-controversial notion of a neolithic "Old Europe" dominated by goddess-centered matriarchal societies. Gimbutas's speculations may be enjoyed irrespective of belief, and like him she remains a highly divisive figure, embraced by some, scorned by others. Watson is firmly in the former camp. She makes Rhianne and other priestesses the inheritors of the neolithic goddess cult and places their waning but still potent power in opposition to the patriarchal authority of the druids. Interestingly, unlike Marillier, she ignores the fact of human sacrifice.

Watson's lovers make an appealing pair, though they seem more like denizens of our own time than of 80 AD. The supporting characters, especially the villains, are one-dimensional, but entertainingly so. *The White Mare* marks the debut of a talented

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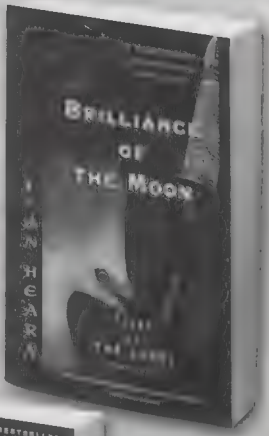

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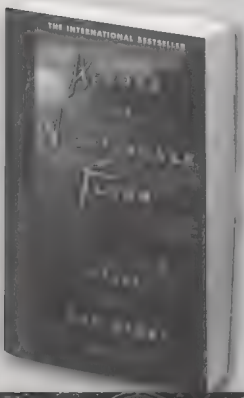

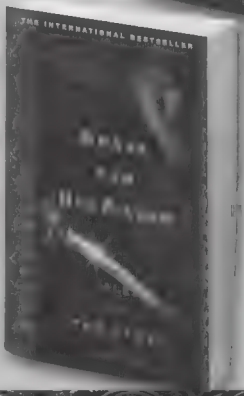

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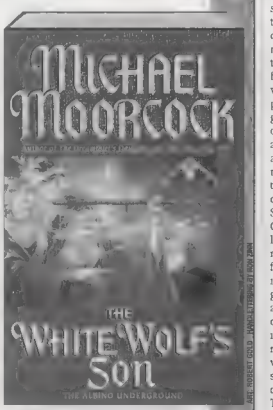

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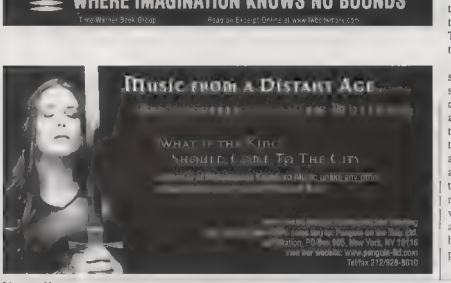

writer, and readers looking for romance will find it aplenty in these pages. It even works as a kind of prequel to Mariller's series. But for me, when it comes to historical romance set in Scotland and seasoned with a pinch of fantasy, Dorothy Dunnett's ravishing *Lymond Chronicles* still take the prize

Three Hands for Scorpio, Andre Norton, Tor Books, New York, hardcover 288 pp $23.95, ISBN. 0-765-30464-3

I was midway through this novel when I heard the sad news that its author, the "Grand Dame" of science fiction and fantasy, had passed away at the age of ninety-three. Many if not most writers who reach such an august age are content to lay down their pens, but not Ms. Norton. As she grew older, her output lessened and became more collaborative in nature, but she continued to produce solid solo work exemplifying the qualities that distinguished her writing from the first: compelling plots, with plenty of action, sympathetic, highly intelligent young protagonists, frequently female, often possessing magical or psionic powers, and often aided by animals with similar abilities, and a prose style that was gently mannered, yet clear and concise. The setting of *Scorpio* is locale based on the borderland area between England and Scotland, with a touch of Alabama's Dismals Canyon thrown in. The three daughters of a local lord, Earl Scorpy of Verset, are kidnapped by henchmen of a rival who has fallen under the spell of a holy man preaching the misogynistic gospel of a new religion. The young women—Tamara, Sabina, and Drucilla—are triplets who share a closeness intensified by magical talents inherited from their mother. Dumped in a mysterious region called the Dismals, from which no one has ever returned, the plucky siblings must marshal all their skills and courage in order to find their way home. They are assisted by a mysterious young man, Zolan, who wields magical talents of his own, and by Zolan's companion, a large catlike beast called Climber. Along the way the sisters discover unsettling secrets about the Dismals, about the nature of their Talents (and of magic itself), and about themselves.

The narrative is divided into first person sections penned after the fact by each of the sisters, a device that does not wholly succeed, as the siblings are so close in mind and spirit as to be almost a single person; their writing styles tend to blur together so that it's difficult at times to distinguish among them. Nor is the ending of the novel as tightly wrought as its beginning, leading to the suspicion that the author's final illness may have intervened. Still, younger readers will be captivated by *Scorpio*'s weird sisters, and older readers will find much to celebrate in its pages, even as they mourn the passing of its author. ❧

Paul Witcover

The Tears of LUNA

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

IT IS NO SECRET THAT A SPHINX LOVES RIDDLES AND is compelled to ask them at every opportunity. Since it is also a sphinx's nature to devour those who do not answer her riddles, it's likewise well known that sphinxes are the most solitary of creatures. What is not so well known is that sphinxes are very sociable beings at heart, so the circumstances dictated by their fundamental natures seem a cruel irony at best. Doubtless a curse was involved somewhere.

So it was with equal parts excitement and sorrow that the sphinx named Helena watched a young man approach along the stony road that ran past her cave.

"At least he'll have to talk to me before I kill him," she said.

Love is a riddle, a mystery, and a monster that can devour you alive. So why do we pursue it?

THE PENULTIMATE RIDDLE

By Richard Parks
Illustration by Randy Gallegos

Helena had been sunning herself, as was her custom, on top of the overhang shielding the entrance to her den. She was quite young as sphinxes go, no more than two hundred or thereabout. Her lion's body was sleek and tawny, her forepaws tipped with magnificent claws, and her wings at once more powerful and more lovely than a swan's. As for the womanly portion of her body, well, a man who spied that first could be forgiven for forgetting all about the rest of her, men being as men are.

She wasn't a particularly vain creature despite her beauty, though she did allow herself to wonder what the man would say when he got close enough to see her—reactions varied but were always interesting, usually involving either screams or begging. Yet what actually happened wasn't quite what she expected.

"Oh, there you are," he said, and he smiled at her.

Helena frowned. "Umm, aren't you surprised?"

"Not a bit," he said. "This is a lonely road by a hillside, and clearly the sort of place where a sphinx might live, yes?"

"Well . . . yes. Am I to understand that you were looking for me?"

He shrugged. "You? Well, I would have if I'd known how lovely you were." At that Helena actually blushed, and he continued, "but the truth is I was looking for a sphinx. I didn't know that you would be the particular sphinx. That was merely my good fortune. My name is Leontas, by the way."

She blinked. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Helena. I'm also somewhat confused. Good fortune? You do know what a sphinx does, don't you?"

"I have heard," he said. "Yet I also have a suspicion that I wish for you to confirm. Frankly it's a question that's nagged me for much of my life, so much so that I finally decided that it might well be worth risking that life to find the answer."

Helena smiled. "I don't answer questions. For that you want the Oracle at Delphi, though why anyone thinks they can get a useful answer out of that addled creature is beyond me. I mean 'Cross the river and you will destroy a great kingdom'? What was that man thinking?"

"I don't know what King Croesus was thinking, but I'm thinking that you won't answer questions, but you'll ask them?"

Helena sighed. "It was rhetorical. You know that."

"Fine, then. You won't answer my question, and I won't answer your riddle. Fair is fair."

"Not answering is the same as failing to answer, and I'll eat you regardless," Helena pointed out.

"Perhaps," Leontas replied, "but is it really as much fun as me getting the riddle wrong? What if I could answer it? Oedipus did."

"The sphinx in that case was placed at Thebes as part of a curse and frankly she was sick of the whole thing. She must have been, to ask such an easy riddle, and I'm not going to jump off any mountains as she did, win or lose. Still . . ." Helena thought about it. "I haven't had anyone to talk to in such a long time and I'll admit that I'm curious whether you could answer my riddle given a fair chance. Fine, then. Ask your question, and I'll answer. Then it's your turn. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Leontas said. Helena thought that perhaps he agreed a little too quickly for any sane man, which perhaps he wasn't. Not that his state of mind made any difference, but she did wonder. Leontas continued almost without a pause. "My question is this: how many riddles do you know?"

Helena smiled, and couldn't resist preening just the slightest bit. "All of them."

Leontas, for his part, seemed to be mad at her answer. He danced around in a little circle, laughing and shrieking. When he was barely coherent again he shouted, "I knew it! I knew it!"

Helena watched this strange spectacle for a while, then finally said, "What way is that?"

"The way you'd use a rope or a knife or a precipice. I may be a monster, but I do have feelings."

"You think I'm committing suicide."

"There's no other explanation."

"Then you're not trying hard enough," he said mildly. "I admit, there's a good possibility that I will die today, but, with all due respect, it's not inevitable."

"You're certainly tempting fate."

"A man's fate is sealed from the moment of birth, and the only thing that keeps us interested in life is that we don't know how it ends. No, I'm not tempting the fates, Helena. I'm tempting you. Or intriguing you. I'm a riddle, too. One that, despite your boast, you don't know the answer to."

"You're a puny mortal and sooner or later I'm going to eat you. And it was no boast. I do know the all the riddles and all the answers. All sphinxes do." Helena wasn't sure if she was more irritated or amused.

"Then why ask them? And don't say 'Because it's my nature.'"

"Is that your question?"

Leontas seemed to consider. "Yes."

Helena sighed. "I do wish you wouldn't waste a question on such a trivial matter. I ask riddles because I enjoy asking riddles."

"Try again," Leontas said.

She frowned. "I beg your pardon? Are you going to repeat the question until you get an answer you like? I never agreed to that."

"No, I'm going to ask the question until I get a proper answer. To say you enjoy it is like saying I eat solely because I love food . . . and

"You're a puny mortal and sooner or later I'm going to eat you."

sighed. "Well, I hope this was worth your pains, because now it's time for my riddle. Ready?"

"Ready," said Leontas, though it was clearly costing him a great deal of effort to keep from giggling.

The sphinx hesitated. "Are you sure you don't need a few moments?"

Leontas shook his head and managed an expression more befitting the solemnity of the moment. "That's very kind of you, but I'll be fine."

"No you won't," she said, but there didn't seem to be any point in delaying the inevitable. "All right, here goes. I have many doors in, but no doors out. A bed, but no one sleeps within. What am I?"

"Well, one could quibble about the part about not sleeping . . ."

"No stalling," she said.

Leontas shrugged. "Obviously you're a tomb."

"Obviously. Go home, Leontas."

"You're showing me mercy. Why?"

"Mercy?" Helena raised up on her forepaws and spread her majestic wings. "Puny human. You answered my riddle and that's enough. Don't insult me or I'll devour you, answered riddle or no."

"I didn't mean to insult you. I just asked why. That was an easy riddle."

"A sphinx? Merciful? Insult enough. And it was only easy because you knew the answer. The outcome could have been very different, you know. Besides," she added, "you've already had your question."

"Suppose I trade you another answer?" he said.

Helena blinked. After a moment she folded her wings and settled back down on the ledge. "You're joking, aren't you?"

"Not a bit. I ask, you answer. You ask, I answer. Just as we did before."

Helena sighed deeply. "I think I finally understand. It's rather rude to use me this way, you know."

I do, by the way, but it's not the whole answer. I eat to live, and so do you. Do you ask riddles to live? Why does a sphinx enjoy asking riddles so?"

Helena, irritated for reasons she couldn't have put into words, forced herself to think about it. After a little while she gave him the only answer she had left. "It's not simply that I enjoy asking riddles, Leontas—asking riddles is the only real joy I have."

Leontas didn't say anything for several long moments. "Well then," he said at last, his voice gruff. "Ask."

This time, Leontas, I will not go easy on you.

"Find me cold, teach me hot, clean me soft, bear me oft. What am I?"

"Ummm..."

Helena bared her teeth. "No stalling."

"A moment or two to reflect is not stalling," Leontas said. "I allowed as much for you!"

"Fine, fine, but no more than that." Helena licked her lips and was rewarded by a very palpable shudder from Leontas. For a moment his expression went as blank as a block of granite, and Helena was idly debating whether to nip him from the neck down or the groin up when he suddenly returned from wherever far place he'd gone off to.

"G-gold," he said. "You're gold."

"So I am." She looked thoughtful. "You were afraid, for a while. I saw it. Come to that, I could smell it."

"Of course I was afraid! I was very close to death."

"If so, it was only because you were courting death like a lover. The first riddle was my choice, but the second was yours. No matter, you're a fortunate mortal and answered the second riddle too. You can go home now."

For a moment, Helena thought she saw panic in Leontas's eyes. "I'm not quite ready to leave," he said a bit wistfully. "I have another

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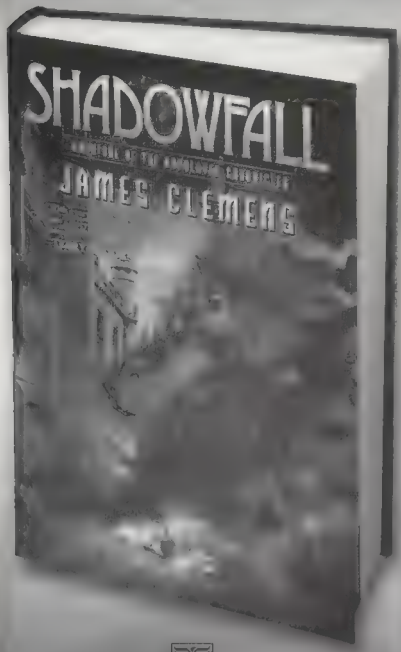

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"[illegible] a little hole, then tears another, and [illegible]"

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"[illegible]"

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question."

She frowned. "In that case, so have I."

"A riddle, you mean."

She shrugged. "A riddle is at heart a question. I'll be fair with this one. I won't ask for esoteric knowledge or great cleverness, just a question that only you can answer." She waved a claw in his direction, like a school master wagging a finger. "However, this question is on the same terms as a riddle. Fail to answer me and I'll devour you. Answer mine and I'll answer yours as before. Fair?"

"I suppose ..." He paused to rub the back of his neck. "Helena, do you mind if I climb up there for a bit? I'm not carrying any weapons, and I'm getting a stiff neck looking up at you."

She shrugged. "As you wish. That way I won't have to chase you as far."

Leontas disappeared for a moment under the overhang, then with a rattle of falling stones, he clambered up to stand on the ledge beside the sphinx. He saw the old bones scattered about and paused to examine them more closely. Some were human, but not all. He seemed to be paying as much attention to the animal bones as to the human. Helena watched him as he poked around.

"You haven't killed that many men," he said finally.

"Most have sense enough to avoid this road since I came here," she said. "Besides, I need to eat but seldom."

"I suppose, then, that the poor ox lying here failed to answer your riddle?"

She shrugged. "'Seldom' doesn't mean 'never.' I was hungry, he was meat. You can't always depend on the foolishness of men."

"I'll have to take your word for that," he said, but he was looking off toward the distant hills. "I had two implied questions, which you just answered. Why?"

Helena shook her head in exasperation. "It's impossible to have a decent conversation without sometimes imparting information. That's not important. What matters is what questions you choose to ask, and which you choose to answer."

"I suppose you're right. All right, then, I'm ready. Ask your riddle, question."

"Why are you courting death?" Helena asked.

"I told you I'm not ... all right, I admit that it looks that way. But I swear I'm not, really."

She licked her lips again. "Is that your answer?"

"It is," he said, and Helena was gathering herself to spring when he went on, "but it's not the explanation. Which is what you really want, I think."

Helena subsided for the moment, but her gaze lost none of its intensity. "I'm waiting."

He took a deep breath, let it out. "Life is supposed to be enough."

She frowned. "I don't understand."

"Neither did I, at first. I mean, living things want to live, in general. Certainly, suicides are not uncommon. Sometimes it's confusion, sometimes an obligation. A choice between two bad alternatives, a moment of weakness. All those things. But most of the time life is its own justification. You're alive. You accept the lot that fate deals you, and stay alive as long as possible since we all know mortal men have little to look forward to save being a shade in Hades' realm for eternity. Considering that, is it no wonder we cherish life?"

"A rhetorical question?" Helena asked.

"No more than yours, really. You ask why I'm courting death. What you really want to know is why I'm courting you."

She blinked. "Are you? How very odd, but if so you'd do well to surrender that notion immediately. That's not the way for a sphinx, even among our own kind. We're monsters, created by unnatural unions. We do not mate with our kind or any other."

He smiled then, and shook his head. "Maybe 'courting' isn't the right word, but I obviously owe Apollo a sacrifice or two because I can't think of a better one."

Helena sighed. "By Zeus's hairy arse ... a poet. I should have known."

"A bad poet and a worse farmer," Leontas said without a trace of either false modesty or guile. It was the simple truth, and Helena knew it for such. She waited.

"Neither is such a problem really. I'll get by in life," said Leontas, then added, "assuming I live past today, that is. Not everyone knows a bad poet when they hear one, and even an inept farmer can grow enough for himself when he has no family or other obligations. Yet sometimes, the idea of 'getting by' in life just isn't enough, no matter how short a span we have to enjoy. Not for a king, or a hero, or even a third-rate poet. Sometimes you have to reach for more, consequences or no."

"I'm not a prize, Leontas. I'm a monster, and I will be your death!"

He smiled at her. "You are all those things. I'm courting you because you are what you are. I'm asking death because, well, sometimes that's the price a mortal pays to be in the presence of something beyond himself. A mystery."

Helena didn't say anything for several long moments and was rewarded with just a touch more fear from Leontas. "Ask your question," she said at last.

He let out the breath he'd been holding, waiting to see if she would accept his answer. "You know all the riddles and all the answers," he said.

"That's not a question."

"You also pointed out earlier that a riddle is at heart a question. So, in essence, sphinxes have the answers to any question a man could ask. That's logic."

"It is, but it's also not a question," she said.

"This is. If you know all the answers, why did you have to ask why I'm here?"

Helena was silent for a long time, and Leontas smiled. "No stalling."

"I don't know," she said.

"I think you do," he said, smiling slightly.

"I said I don't! Maybe riddles and questions aren't quite the same thing. Maybe I was wrong about that."

"Maybe. So. Now what?"

She frowned. "I don't understand."

"Yes you do. You didn't answer my question."

She showed her teeth. "You think you're going to devour me, Leontas?"

He shook his head. "I may act foolishly at times, but I'm not that sort of fool. Still, there should be consequences, don't you think? Fair is fair and, no matter what else we've been to each other, we have been that."

"What sort of consequences did you have in mind?"

He barely hesitated. "I get to kiss you."

She growled low in her throat. "Keeping your life should be quite enough!"

He smiled, even though he was trembling. "Yes, one would think so. Yet, as I already told you, it isn't. Not nearly enough."

Helena stared at him. "I don't pretend to understand what madness drives you, Leontas, poet or no, but there's one thing you need to understand—I'm not what you seem to think I am! Some of me looks like a human woman, granted, but it's just appearance and no more. I eat dead meat! My breath is carrion and will likely kill you on its own, even if the scent of you and my own hunger don't overpower my restraint. Say what you will about fairness, but I'm making no promises."

"You're a mystery, Helena. I haven't decided what I think you are, so I can't really be disappointed. As for dying, that's one more chance, isn't it? As with all the others chances, it's mine to take. As for promises ... well, I didn't ask for any." He approached her and she shrank back, almost cowering at the mouth of her den. Leontas was shaking also, but that didn't stop him.

"I know why I'm afraid," Leontas said. "But why are you?"

"That," she said, "will cost you a riddle."

He smiled at her. "Not today. You can ask me tomorrow."

Helena looked grim. "No. I can't. You won't be here."

"One way or another, yes I will," Leontas said, and kissed the monster. ❧

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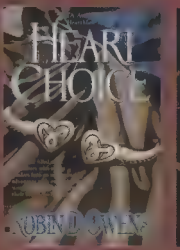

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a statement IN THE CASE

BY THEODORA GOSS ■ ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREA WICKLUND

Sure, I know Istvan Horvath. We met about a year before Eva died. That's my wife, Eva. You knew that? Yeah, I figured you were pretty thorough. ■ It was the year of the blizzard, when snow covered the cars parked on the streets and even the Post Office shut down. I didn't have to go to work for a week. So one night, I think it was Thursday, Eva says, "Mike, I only have one of the blue pills left." This was when we still thought the chemo was doing something. When we discovered it wasn't, she turned her head toward me on the pillow—she was so beautiful, like the day we got married—and said, "Mike, I think the Lord wants me home." After that, she refused to take the pills. But I couldn't throw them out. Every morning I opened the medicine cabinet, and there they were, the blue ones, the orange ones that made her throw up, the green ones that made her hair fall out, the purple ones that caused constipation. When she died, I flushed them down the toilet. But you don't want to hear about Eva. I was talking about the day I met Istvan Horvath. ■ Well, there she was saying there were no more blue pills, and how was I going to get to Walgreens? The snow was up to my armpits, and the subway wasn't running. Then Eva said, "What about that store around the corner?" Now, we always went to Walgreens. You know, the guy in Alabama who sold aspirin as that stuff you take for cholesterol? So we were always careful. We never went to the store around the corner. For one thing, the sign said "Apotnecary," which looked kind of foreign, and we wanted our pills one hundred percent American. For another, the front of the store was kind of dirty. You know, like nobody washed the windows. ■ But we had to have the blue pills. So I put on my boots and walked through the snow to the Apotnecary. And I tell you, it was just around the corner, but by the time I got there I felt like I was going to have a heart attack. It was some work, walking through all that snow. ■ I figured the store would be closed, and I'd have to knock on the other door, the one for the apartment above the store, which had a sign on it that said "Pharmacist." But the sign in the window—which was written in magic marker, can you believe it—said "Open." So I walked in. ■ When the bell on the door rang, Istvan stood up from behind the counter. Not that I knew his name then. He was wearing a white coat, so I figured he was the pharmacist. "Hello," he said, in a foreign kind of voice, like I'd expected. I figured he was probably Russian. We had a lot of Russians in the neighborhood, in those days. Nothing wrong with that. My grandfather came through Staten Island. We're all immigrants, right? Even the Indians came from someplace else. Now, Gorski, what's that, Polish? Ernie at the Post Office, he's Polish. Do you mind if I get some water, Sergeant Gorski? I'm not used to talking so much, since Eva died. Nowadays, you get these lawyers and doctors moving in. They like the neighborhood atmosphere." Then the old people can't afford it anymore, so they go to Florida, to the retirement communities. And suddenly there's nobody to talk to. But Eva and I had some savings, and with my pension, well, I'm not ready to leave the neighborhood yet. ■ So Istvan stands up from behind the counter and says, "Hello. Today, I did not expect customers. I was setting traps for the mice. Not to hurt them, you understand. I take them outside, to the cemetery."

RUE

Later, I told him they would come back. Mice are smart, they know their way home. But he said, "Then I will trap them again. It is pleasant in the cemetery, with the grass and trees. I will leave them bread, and perhaps they will learn to like it there." Can you imagine? A regular mouse vacation. But that was István all over. He wouldn't swat the flies on the walls. He'd catch them and put them outside, and half an hour later they'd get in again through the holes in the screen. So you're not going to convince me that he murdered his wife.

Now, I have to admit I didn't like the look of the place, when I first came in. There was dust on the shelves, and the boxes of Ace bandages looked like they'd been there a while. Toward the back there were bottles of what looked like dried leaves and flowers, with labels—in magic marker, what did you expect—saying things like Tansy, Agrimony, Rue. But the bottle of blue pills he gave me looked just like it came from Walgreens. When he handed it to me he said, "Tell her to take it always with a piece of bread, so the nausea is not so bad." And you know, he was right.

I won't say I stopped going to Walgreens after that, but I got to buying little things at the Apothecary. Tweezers, antacids, Vicks VapoRub. One day I noticed a chess board on the counter. "Colonel Borodin, she left it," he told me. He could never get his genders right. To him, everyone was a she. "She has a problem with the liver, all that vodka. But she cannot pay the bill, so she gives me this. It is beautiful, no?"

It was beautiful, with ebony and ivory pieces. My grandfather taught me to play chess. He said, in Italy all the men would play in the park, while the women were cooking Sunday dinner. That was the way to live, he said. I sure wouldn't mind living that way.

So István and I started to play together. Usually we played in the Apothecary, on the counter, but a couple of times I invited him over to meet Eva. That was when I found out he was Hungarian. Eva's grandmother was Hungarian, and she knew a few words: yes, no, hello, goodbye, thank you. I think he liked to hear them. Once, he brought a plastic bag full of yellow and white flowers. "Chamomile," he said. "It helps the stomach." Later, he showed me where he dried things, in the basement. He had racks down there, with plants hanging from them. I know that's not what you found. Don't they teach you patience, at the police academy? Chamomile tea was the only thing Eva drank, the month before she died. Toward the end, when she couldn't talk, he told her stories. About girls who lived in rivers, and hens that laid eggs covered with diamonds and rubies. They were so fancy, they were sent to the Russian czar. He said he had learned them from his mother. Eva loved those stories. She would smile, and then for a while she'd be able to sleep. She didn't sleep much, in those days.

Before she died, we didn't have a lot of friends. She hadn't gone out for a long time, except to the hospital, and I didn't want to invite the guys from the Post Office to the funeral. Ernie, for example, he can't stand hallways, especially if they're narrow. Stan doesn't like bushes. And none of us like going to funerals. Your father was in Vietnam? Yeah, you know what I'm talking about.

Our parents, they died a while back, and her brother was out in Tucson. So it was just me and István at the cemetery. He brought a bunch of Easter lilies, exactly the kind of flowers Eva would have liked.

I didn't see him for a while after that. I felt like keeping to myself. I went to work, came home, opened a bottle of beer, and watched TV. I didn't even answer the telephone. It was always someone trying to sell me something, like a time share in Florida, or asking what I thought about the mayor. And István left me alone. That's the kind of guy he was, sensitive. Like Eva.

But one day, he knocked on the door. "Mike," he said, after I'd let him in and asked if he wanted a beer, "I have to go to Budapest. My mother, she is dying. The doctors are not so good there. And now I think they will not put me in prison."

See, the Berlin Wall had come down. I watched them take it down on TV. I figured, this was what we had fought for. To defeat the Commies, right? That's what Ernie said. The day that wall came down, we won the Vietnam war. I don't know. It didn't feel won to me.

"The first time I tried to escape," he told me—I was drinking beer, he was drinking chamomile tea—"they found me. I was stupid. I tried to escape on the train. I was only fifteen. The guards, they laughed and beat the soles of my feet. They sent me back to my mother and told her I would not run away anymore. The second time, I was a pharmacist, finished with university. A German friend came to Budapest on vacation. His car, the back seat, it was hollow. I stayed there until we crossed the border into West Germany."

He sat with his hands wrapped around the mug. "I wonder if I was wrong to leave my country. A pharmacist, she is useful everywhere." He looked down into his tea. "I do not know what my mother looks like, now. When I left, her hair was brown. Perhaps it is white."

"You can't change the past," I said. And you can't. It's the one thing you can't do.

He asked if I would take care of the store, just check on it once in a while to make sure no one broke in and the mice didn't eat everything. Then he gave me the key.

I didn't see him again for a couple of months. Then one day I heard a knock on the door. It was him, even thinner than usual, like he hadn't been eating. And standing next to him was this girl.

Of course it was her. Don't worry, I'm getting to that. She had on this coat that looked like it came from the Salvation Army, and a cap on her head that was the color of—well, anyway, it was brown. She was ugly, then. Pale, like she hadn't been out in the sun in years. And she had dark circles under her eyes. I mean, she looked like she'd been raised in a box.

"You can't change the past," I said. And you can't. Its the one thing you can't do.

István said, "My friend Mike!" and kissed me on both cheeks. Now, I don't hold with men kissing, you understand. But he'd been away for a while, and they do things different in those foreign countries.

"This is Ildiko," he said, "my wife." She'd been taking care of his mother, he explained. After his mother died, she had nowhere to go. She had no family, and there were no jobs in Budapest. If the country became Communist again, the borders would close, and she'd have no way out. Now isn't that István all over. He marries this girl because he feels sorry for her. He might as well have invited the flies into his apartment.

The first thing I noticed, when I went to the Apothecary for some Pepto Bismol and maybe a game of chess, was the sign. It wasn't in magic marker anymore. It was one of those regular signs that other stores had, the Pizza Express and Lou's Shoe Repair and the Vacuum Emporium. The window had been cleaned. In it were a

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row of combs and brushes, and some of those plastic things women put in their hair Clips and things. Not the sorts of things Eva would ever have worn. Though toward the end, she almost always wore a turban

Ildiko was standing behind the counter, with her hair back in one of those plastic clips. "István not here," she said, and rang me up She was looking a little better, like she'd gotten some sleep But I don't like skinny women, or ones that don't say hello or thank you. She stared at me like I had no right to be in that store. I tell you, I knew even then that something was wrong. You don't believe me? Well, you're the one trying to figure out who burned down the Apothecary

About a week later, István invited me over to play chess He told me he'd been at a pharmacist's convention It had been Ildiko's idea, like the combs and brushes. Everything was Ildiko's idea, then

This time there was a rack of magazines by the register. *Woman's Day, Soap Opera Digest, The National Enquirer.* Those bottles of leaves and flowers that he'd dried himself—they'd been replaced on the shelves with soap and shampoo There were jars of face cream It was cleaner, sure, and more like Walgreens But I didn't like it.

Ildiko was behind the counter again, but I almost didn't recognize her. For one thing, she'd dyed her hair. It was blond, like Marilyn Monroe, though you could still see the roots. And she was wearing bright red lipstick. Her fingernails were bright red, too. She was something to look at, all right But I sure wouldn't have wanted to be her husband.

István, he thought she was wonderful "She loves America," he told me, setting up the chess pieces We were upstairs, in the apartment. She didn't want him playing chess on the counter It would make the customers think there wasn't enough business. "She wants this to be a real American store She thinks we should name it Drug Mart You see, she is so clever about the window. We need a display, she says Something to bring in the women And her Russian is better than mine The old men, the majors and colonels, they like her I bet they do. I wish she and Eva could have met I'm certain they would have liked each other " I wasn't so certain Eva was—well, she was a lady, if you know what I mean And Ildiko Horvath—well, I don t want to say what she was.

At that moment we heard her laughing, and a "Da, da" coming from downstairs

You think I'm being unfair? One night, this was about two weeks later, I was walking down the street, smoking a cigarette Eva would never let me smoke in the apartment, and I still go outside. I don't know why. I guess I imagine her saying, "Mike, you're going to get that smoke all over my curtains."

Anyway, when I passed the Apothecary, I heard her voice from the upstairs window. "Do you think I enjoy taking care of that stupid woman? Do you think I enjoy cleaning up when she cannot go to the toilet? And then I find out she doesn't leave me a fornt, not a forint!" She was shouting so loud I thought she would wake up Lou He still lives above the Shoe Repair, though he retired last year István answered her in Hungarian, or that's what I figured it was. "Why you think I marry you?" I had to give her one thing, her English was getting better "I deserve—yes, *deserve,* every fornt of that money!"

So don't get on your high horse to me about Ildiko Horvath The *Herald* can go on about the tragic story· young wife found in a basement, burned to death But I know what kind of woman she really was

We started playing chess every week, me and István, and every week there was something new at the store Boxes of Whitman's Samplers Marlboro Lights Those pantyhose in eggs. Ildiko sat at the counter with her blond hair and red nails, in dresses I'd be ashamed to see on Eva

All right, all right, I'll stick to the facts. That day, I went over to play chess. She wasn't at the counter István was there instead, with a liquor bottle open beside him. I'd never seen him drink anything stronger than chamomile tea. "Come join me, friend Mike," he said, and poured some into a glass. It was called—now, what was it? Pálinka Peach brandy, though it didn't taste much like peaches. It burned my throat going down.

Yeah, I guess it could account for the smell. So the firemen noticed that, did they?

"We've been friends for a long time, no?" he said, and I nodded I guess he was as close to a friend as I had. "I can tell you, things are not well " His speech was slurred, and it was hard figuring out what he was saying, with that accent. He was drunk of course, and I figured I was in for the whole story. That's what guys do when they're drunk, they tell you the whole story. And then they cry in their beer Waste of good beer, if you ask me. But he got up from the counter and said, "Come, I will show you She said she will shop for dresses at Filene's, and then she will watch a movie She said I should not expect her until evening."

He was swaying from side to side, like one of those toys that kids punch, and they don't fall down. But he managed to unlock the door to the basement. I followed him down the stairs

When he switched on the light, I saw that the racks of drying plants were gone. Instead—how can I describe it? Eva liked movies where people wore costumes. You know, *Dr Zhivago.* In those movies, rich people always have tables with things on them, like statues. That basement was full of tables and chairs, and on them were statues, of women dancing, and all kinds of dogs. There were pieces of lace, just lying on the tables Silver teapots and trays, piles of teaspoons. Glass bowls and vases, dark red and that yellow color, what do they call it? Amber The legs of the tables were carved so they had feet, and the backs of the chairs were inlaid. You know, where they use a different wood to make designs, like birds or flowers. Stan does it as a hobby, but I've never seen ham do anything like that. On one table there was a box filled with jewelry, rings and necklaces and what looked like a crown The kind Miss America wears. On another there was a collection of eggs, and I knew what those were. Eva took me to the museum once, to see those eggs Fabergé, they call them The most expensive eggs in the world. The whole room looked like it belonged in Las Vegas

"What the hell?" I said. I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"My country is poor now," said István. "Many people sell what belonged to their parents or grandparents And Ildiko knows people who will carry these things across the border I don't know how, she does not tell me Mike, how can she know such people?"

"What the hell is she going to do with all this?" I couldn't stop staring. I picked up the crown. It was heavier than I'd expected

"She sells to Americans First she sold only a few pieces, then with the money she bought more, and now she sells the treasures of my country " He held out his hands, as though he didn't know what to say "She tells me, this is America, land of opportunity. I have been here so long, I should be rich by now. But this is not the worst No—"

Above us, I heard the store bell ring

"I must go see the customer," he said, "or Ildiko will be angry." He swayed up the stairs, leaving me in the basement

I looked around me All that stuff in the light of one bare bulb, shining off the carved wood, the polished silver. It was like being in Aladdin's cave

Then I heard something Don't ask me to describe it to you. It came from the back of the basement, behind the tables. Where the light didn't exactly reach. I heard it again

You think it was Ildiko Horvath? You mean, you think he knocked her on the head, hid her in the basement, then took me down to see what she'd been doing? What kind of fool would do a thing like that? No offense, Gorski, but I don't know how you made sergeant. Sure, he might have been too drunk to care. But that's not what happened. I told you she'd gone to the movies I saw her come home myself, around six o'clock.

Continued on page 90

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TOR

THE Queen's WOOD

If faith were a matter of fact, would it still be faith? Or does faith require a modicum of doubt for the true believer to make the great leap?

TIRELESS RAIN SPILLED FROM A RUPTURED SKY. Nicholas the Witness sloughed through ankle-deep mire, braving the frozen raindrops that stung like needles, keeping pace a few steps behind Marabelle. With each lightning bolt that lanced the sky, Nicholas could make out the shapeless form of her woolen shift and the jeweled hilt of the ceremonial dagger at her hip. Her progress was not reluctant, as might be expected from one approaching her own death. Instead she moved with a righteous resolve, steeled by the animus of her detractors.

"Look ahead," said Marabelle, pointing toward the purple horizon. They'd at last reached the Firstwood. The tree line spanned the horizon, an endless array of blue tipped wedgewoods, ancient oaks gnarled and bent by the weight of their own branches, clusters of sumac and cedar, groves of cypress fat with moss. They hissed as rain showered against their leaves, and the very sight of them caused Nicholas to shudder as if their trunks were covered in nightmares instead of bark.

"I'd hoped it would take us longer to reach this place." Nicholas trained his gaze to the path before him, afraid of what he might see if he stared too long at the forbidding forest.

By Josh Rountree
Illustration by Mike Kerr

"Our destination lies beyond the forest. Passing through it is inevitable." Marabelle continued toward the trees, seemingly unconcerned. She had an irritating way of taking everything in stride that caused Nicholas endless distress. The forest did not seem to worry her, nor the ageless rumors of the Lady who dwelled within, the pagan Queen and her cotene of terrible servants. And worst of all, she cared not for her pending battle with the Turion, an uncertain contest with suicide as the winner's prize.

"Recite the second of the priest's prophecies," said Marabelle.

"A fearsome fox that walks as man." He'd committed it to memory, along with the other two prophecies that gauged their progress toward the place of summoning. As always, the first was: *The wrath of Suz made manifest.* The remorseless storm had filled that condition, and experience dictated it would only worsen. After the flood would come snow, then sleet, then unyielding ice. And should it linger too long? Well, the kingdom had yet to be cursed with that knowledge. Nicholas prayed Marabelle would not be the first to fail.

"Raise your eyes then. The Lady has sent an escort."

Reluctantly, Nicholas looked again toward the forest. A crouching shape waited just inside the tree line, its face elongated into a canine snout, its naked body furred with orange and red bristles. Black beady eyes darted about in sunken sockets, both backlit by a curious golden light that dissolved any notion that this creature was simply a fox. As they drew nearer, Nicholas noticed the quiver of arrows strapped to the animal's back, and the crudely carved bow slung across one shoulder. The creature's hands alone seemed human, and even that observation was put to task when a closer inspection turned up cruel claws at the tip of each finger. It was one of the Lady's creatures, that much was certain.

A lifetime of nursemaids' stories and warnings whispered across empty tankards had given Nicholas cause to fear this place. It was an irrational fear, he'd never truly believed the tales. Now faced with unassailable evidence of their veracity, the very thought of entering the Firstwood gave rise to a sickening sense of terror. He wanted nothing more than to return to his comfortable world of ignorance and normalcy. But the fox-man's presence did not deter Marabelle's stride, and Nicholas was given little choice but to follow. His only other option would be returning to Parliseel to face the judgment of his peers, to explain to them why he'd allowed the Offered's journey to continue unrecorded. It was beyond consideration.

They stopped just shy of the forest, and the fox rose to greet them. Though its back was bowed, it stood on its hind legs, the top of its head even with Nicholas' waist. Its eyes glowed like fireflies and its face swam in the shadows they cast.

"The Lady has long expected your arrival," it said, never leaving the relative shelter of the forest. The beast's voice sounded neither guttural nor foreign; instead, it spoke with the voice of a man. This similarity in their natures unsettled Nicholas far more than he would have imagined possible.

"Your Lady is wise," said Marabelle, her voice raised to battle the gale. "We've indeed come to seek her favor."

"I doubt it's the Lady's favor you actually seek," said the fox. His eyes shifted skyward. Another blast of lightning lit the sky, a reminder that Suz was ever-present. "Your faith lies with another."

"Yet we must pass this way," said Marabelle. "And it's said none may pass through the forest without the Lady's grace."

"The Lady's grace is not freely given."

"Then I'll have to persuade her."

Nicholas marveled at the way Marabelle challenged the fox. Her selection as this generation's Daggerbearer had been met with skepticism and outright derision by much of the citizenry. Never before had a woman been selected, and few believed she'd be able to face down the Turion and end the King's misery. She was a willowy woman with parchment skin and shoulder length hair that flowed like liquid night. Beautiful and intelligent, but hardly the battle-proven soldier that traditionally sacrificed himself for the kingdom. Yet here she stood, fixing the fox with her unwavering glare, her fear either hidden or nonexistent.

"Follow me, then," said the fox, its expression darkening. "My place is not to question the wisdom of fools." Ears pressed back against its head, the fox turned and led them into the forest.

Marabelle matched strides with the animal, while Nicholas followed several paces behind. His loathing of the forest was abated somewhat by the shelter it provided from the storm. Rain still fell, but the thick covering of trees allowed very little to reach the travelers' heads. The forest itself seemed like any other, and Nicholas allowed himself a momentary respite from his anxieties.

"What do they call you?" asked Marabelle.

"Names too numerous to count," said the fox. "That's the way of this place."

"So say the legends. I wouldn't think of asking your given name. I simply want to know what to call you."

"Smart girl," said the fox. Something resembling a grin crept across its face. "Call me Sam. That's a nice human name, isn't it? Care to divulge yours?"

Marabelle smiled. "Perhaps another time."

"What about you?" asked Sam. He leered at Nicholas, lips peeling back to reveal an unblemished row of sharp teeth.

"Let's make this easy," said Marabelle, not waiting for Nicholas to respond. "You may call me the Offered, and you may refer to my companion as the Witness. Will that suffice?"

"Suit yourself."

MARABELLE HAD SAVED NICHOLAS FROM A POTENTIAL stumbling block, but she needn't have bothered. He'd heard every fairy story that had ever been whispered, and he understood the myriad perils of this place. How many of the tales featured foolish travelers who'd unwittingly divulged their names, not realizing that such information granted a great deal of power in the Firstwood? Nicholas would never have volunteered his name, nor would he eat anything that grew in the trees or was offered by the Queen's people. One taste and no other food would ever sate the appetite. Nicholas doubted they'd make it to the other end of the forest, but if they did, he didn't intend to live the rest of his life haunted by the memory of this place.

"Hungry?" asked Sam, as if he were reading Nicholas' thoughts. He bent over and pulled a mushroom from the earth.

"No thank you," said Marabelle.

The fox tossed the mushroom into his mouth, still grinning. "See the place up ahead where the trees clear a bit?"

"Yes," said Marabelle.

"It's the edge of the Lady's domain."

"This land is not hers?" asked Nicholas.

Sam regarded him with indignant scowl. "Certainly not. You'll know when you walk the Lady's soil."

The fox was right. They passed between two trees whose trunks arched together to form a proscenium, and at once the darkness drained from the world. The rain was gone, and brilliant sunshine poured from the sky in its place. The trees bled impossible colors, their branches fat with apples and plums, their leaves shimmering in a warm, pleasant breeze. Daffodils and bluebonnets, tulips and marigolds all surrounded their feet in delicate arrangements, proud heads stretching skyward from a blanket of summer grass. Birdsong and chirruping insects offered pastoral accents to the gurgling sound of a nearby stream, and the place smelled of clean soil and happy memories.

"Prepare yourselves. The Lady is near," said Sam.

The animal's voice was deeper, and Nicholas yelped when he saw that Sam had taken a different form. Now he stood before them, eight feet of bear standing on two legs, only his golden eyes unchanged.

"Why did you change?" asked Nicholas, easing away from the towering shapeshifter.

"I bore easily. Follow me."

The bear dropped to four legs and loped forward; Marabelle and Nicholas followed behind. Despite the seemingly bucolic

nature of the Lady's forest, Nicholas felt a growing sense of unease, as if they'd stepped into a quickly tightening trap from which there was little hope of escape. He thought about trying to convince Marabelle to turn back, maybe try a route around the forest. But he knew there wasn't time, and he was certain Marabelle would deny his pleas. More unsettling still, the option to turn back had likely been taken out of their hands. They walked in the Lady's realm now, and if the stories were true, her whim would be their reality

AT LENGTH, THEY REACHED THE STREAM. A FAMILY OF deer drank from its silvery waters, and a simple stone bridge spanned its banks. The travelers followed the bear across, and found themselves at the foot of the largest tree Nicholas had ever seen. It was as if the tree existed simply by virtue of their presence. Wider than the King's own castle, stretching into the sky beyond the limits of sight, it couldn't have been there a second before. And yet here it was, surrounded by all manner of animal—wolf, boar, deer, squirrel—all standing erect, touched with vaguely human features and watching the strangers approach with impassive, golden eyes.

Nicholas gaped in astonishment, and even Marabelle gave a moment's hesitation before approaching. It was the Forever Tree. Of that there could be little doubt. The earliest scriptures told how Suz planted an acorn of thought in the firmament of *nothing*, and tended the fledgling tree until all the planes of existence sprang from its branches. It was the tree around which all worlds revolved, and to which all souls would return in time. Its uppermost branches supported the realm of Suz, a place of eternal calm and the wellspring of all of humanity's hopes. And far below the least of all worlds, the souls of the damned dangled from numberless roots, bathed in the fires of creation that continually nurtured the ageless tree.

"Close your mouth," said Sam. He seized Nicholas by the collar of his gray robe and pulled him toward the tree. Marabelle had already approached and knelt. Sam dropped Nicholas to the ground beside her, and fell to his own knees. His rapid change of appearance once again vexed Nicholas' senses. Sam had become something very close to human, though his pinched, red-bearded face gave indication that the fox's flesh was his natural state. The other animals followed them to their knees, and even the river seemed to still as Sam spoke

"Your majesty."

And She was there

The Lady emerged from the bark of the Forever Tree, a radiant woman in a gown of living vines. Auburn hair fell past her shoulders, and her eyes glowed with the now familiar golden light. Her features were flawless, her limbs delicate and pale. Silver light poured down the Forever Tree, as if it wept at her presence. None of the stories could have prepared Nicholas for her impossible beauty, and a terrible longing took root in his soul. This lovely myth actually stood before him: The Lady of the Wood, the First Wife of Suz, The Bringer of Sins, and the Bane of Humanity. Lust and despair warred for control of Nicholas' senses.

The prophet's reason for choosing a woman became clear in an instant. Nicholas couldn't help but mouth the words to the third prophecy. *Temptations three, from the tongue of Evil.* When the place of summoning had been determined, and the necessary path through the forest made evident, it had been widely agreed upon that these temptations would come from the Lady. Legends always told of her requirements for passage through her woods, and there was no purer distillation of evil within the limits of man's grasp. The prophet believed that a woman could more readily refuse the Lady's guile, and though Nicholas had scoffed at the notion, he now realized his error. It shamed him to admit his weakness, but he knew that he would do anything she asked of him. There was no way he could deny such a creature.

"So, the Daggerbearer bends her knee," said the Lady. Her voice was like winter fog, ethereal and cold. "She offers me her grovels yet offers Suz her life. I feel I'm being cheated."

"Lady," said Marabelle, still on one knee but staring the goddess in the face. "We come before you to ask passage through your realm, so that we may—"

"There is little you can tell me that I don't already know," said the Lady. "You seek to summon the Turion, slay the creature, then spill your own blood so your king might have everlasting life."

"I do. The storms already rage, and my errand becomes more urgent with each passing second."

"Why would you do such a thing for this *king*? Let him die and another will no doubt take his place."

"I serve more than just my king. I serve my people, and my god. If King Remmon falls, so shall fall the kingdom. It is the will of Suz."

"So your people still believe such idiocy? You're a simple race, but I would have imagined a thousand years' time would grant some measure of wisdom."

"The prophet hears the guidance of Suz. We only follow His will."

"I have no doubt. What a convenient arrangement for Him. Be advised, your god plays you for fools. Would you care to know the truth of the matter?"

Nicholas spied a growing degree of uncertainty in Marabelle's expression. Her unflagging determination seemed to be melting away beneath the Lady's overbearing presence. If Marabelle failed now, they would both surely die. She needed reassurance, and Nicholas fought back his terror long enough to speak

"She's the Queen of Lies. Her words are worthless."

Sam's fist hammered against the back of Nicholas' neck, driving his face into the ground. He felt his nose snap, and painful tears welled in his eyes. Blood rushed from his nostrils, and Nicholas thanked Suz that Sam was still wearing his human skin. Were he still a bear, Nicholas would not have survived the blow.

"Would you care to have your head on my dinner plate?" asked the Lady, never altering the smooth tone of her voice. "If so, then by all means speak again."

Marabelle looked horrified at Nicholas' ruined nose, but he saw the determination return to her eyes, and knew his sacrifice had steeled her resolve.

"My words carry great worth, Witness," said the Lady. "You would do well to remember them carefully. In the unlikely event that you leave this wood with your skin, your journal may offer a better understanding of this whole affair. A gift of truth from my benevolent lips."

She smiled, radiating beauty, and Nicholas fought hard to hold onto his reservations. He wanted to believe everything she said, even though his heart assured him of her deceit. His own words repeated themselves in his head, a continuous mantra to help him resist her charms. *She's the Queen of Lies. Her words are worthless.*

"Your priests teach you that King Remmon was hand chosen by Suz. His rule is eternal so long as one champion faces His challenger each generation, and that same champion gives his life for the greater good. Does that sound accurate?"

"It does," said Marabelle, her voice steady. "We are His chosen people. No others receive such a gift. We watch as plague and pestilence destroy our neighbors, while our countrymen grow old and fat. One life per generation is a pittance."

"True, one life has little worth. But your god's motivation isn't love. Why do you think your people were chosen?"

"King Remmon's devotion is unequalled. Suz judged him worthy."

"Ahh, the root of Suz's deceit. Your people were chosen for no other reason than your realm borders mine. I'm aware your king claims this land as his own, but make no mistake. This forest belongs to me, and no human shall ever wield enough power to take it. You've no doubt heard the story of how Suz banished me from His kingdom. He hurled me from the heavens, with little care for where I fell."

"And you fell here?"

"Very good. I claimed this place, secured it with magic of my own, and even the mighty Suz has been unable to pluck me from

this earth This forest was mine before your race was even conceived, and your very creation was likely no more than an attempt to unseat me "

"I don't understand," said Marabelle. Nicholas watched her close ly, trying to read her expression. If she appeared to be falling for the Lady's lies again, Nicholas would risk another injury to return her to her senses

"This world was pure before Suz created your despicable little creatures to scurry about and destroy everything of worth. You chop trees from the edge of my forest and pollute my river with your filth. You walk about as if the dirt beneath your feet is your divine right, when in fact *you* are the usurpers of this world. The human mind's inability to deal with enchantment has driven the very boundaries of my realm back against me, until all that remains is this single grove. You lie to one another, desperate to convince yourselves that my existence is a myth, and in doing so, your lies may one day become truths. Look at me, girl. I'm no fairy tale. I'm the god of the earth "

The Lady erupted into a ball of blinding light, and Nicholas felt a scream being pulled from his throat as he pressed his palms against his eyes, desperate to shield himself from her brilliance The light burned his flesh, and a chorus of animal wails joined his scream, as the Queen's creatures received the same dose of her wrath At length, the light abated, and Nicholas opened his eyes. To his amazement, the Lady's fury had done him no actual damage He'd felt as if his skin might melt away from his bones

"We haven't the time for your witchery," said Marabelle. She rose to her feet and stood face to face with the goddess. Grunts and squeals sounded from all corners of the grove as her animal servants bristled at this indignity Nicholas regarded Marabelle with an open-mouthed stare and wondered if her insolence had damned them both

"Don't make me kill you, little one " The Lady seemed unaffected by Marabelle's attitude, save for the cruel arch she'd acquired in her eyebrows.

"If murder was your plan, you'd have already killed us. Now offer me your three temptations. I'm eager to leave this place."

The Queen smiled "You're more perceptive than most of your kind. You're part of Suz's design, so yes, you're safe from my hands But not from my words. Your free will may well be His downfall You may choose to accept one of my offers, and if so, then His silly game unravels."

"I'm not easily swayed."

"Your heart tells you I speak the truth The entire Daggerbearer ceremony is a charade, an attempt by Suz to inject your lives with meaning. You look at it as a challenge, an uncertain battle against the fearsome Tunon for the sake of a nation. And yet, no one has ever failed. You didn't even bring a sword to fell the beast "

"I cannot hope to best a monster with weapons. I intend to do it with my wits."

"A noble goal, and I'm certain you'll be successful. Suz will assure it, and your blind nation will continue on, confident in its claim to the earth. Your power will grow, your borders will expand, and eventually I'll be forced from my home But believe me, girl I won't travel far from this world, and my powers will never diminish I offer you this: leave this place and take your companion. I'll not hinder your retreat. Spread my truth to your people I want nothing but this grove; give it to me, and you'll not find my hand in your affairs. Drive me away, and my vengeance shall taint every aspect of your existence. What say you?"

The animals crowded in, eager for Marabelle's answer Flocks of forest birds came to rest on tree limbs, and the trees themselves seemed to creep inward, as if straining to listen. Marabelle let the Lady's words settle, then spoke. "I will only leave this forest to battle the Tunon "

"So you'll continue to believe Suz's lies?"

"I'll continue to uphold the tenets of my faith."

"Your faith is misplaced."

"I'm ready for your second temptation," said Marabelle, ignoring the Lady's attempt to shake her beliefs. Nicholas was starting to understand why the prophet had chosen this woman for the task. Her will seemed unbreakable Nicholas himself could not help but wonder whether the Lady spoke the truth, and he would have been forced to give her offer much more consideration. Their adventure would end in sorrow, no matter the outcome, and if it was all for naught, then he would gladly flee this place now and never return But Marabelle clung tightly to her faith, and when the Lady spoke again, a touch of agitation was evident in her tone

"Very well, then. I offer another possible outcome for your sorry race. It's your king's fault you're tangled up in this moral web. He continues to doom his subjects to this useless quest, even though he knows the truth of it. I propose that you take his place."

"King Remmon rules by the word of Suz."

"Suz is the Creator, but I alone rule this world. Why else would He want to take it from me? Accept my offer and I can make you Queen of Men, a monarch to rule in my name Your people will enjoy the same prosperity and will not be required to undertake fool's errands. No death, no sacrifice, just peace Again, I will only ask that you leave my small piece of land as it is. If you refuse this offer, you not only condemn yourself to death, but all those who come after. Can your conscience bear such a weight?"

Nicholas' heart seized on the opportunity to end the ritual He was not a faithless man, but his devotion was not as deep as Marabelle's In his soul, he knew that it mattered little what god he worshiped, so long as that god ruled with benevolence Yet Marabelle held fast to her beliefs

"I refuse your offer. My conscience will overflow with joy at the thought of worthy souls taking their place in Suz's paradise "

"And you among them?" Cruelty shadowed the Lady's tone.

"If I succeed."

"And you think he'll forgive you for what you've done? Silly child You're bound for the roots, not the heavens." A predatory smile broke across the Lady's face, and for the first time, Nicholas could see the twisted figure that lived beneath her manufactured beauty It was easy to get caught up in her eloquence, to forget her true nature But in that moment, the evil in her soul rushed to the surface, and bathed the forest in its malevolence

"What do you know of my sins?" asked Marabelle, truly taken aback for the first time It was as if the Lady's words had stripped away her confidence. Nicholas watched as she drew away from her accuser, face pulled tight with anger, visibly shaken The animals mocked her with their cries, sensing their mistress' triumph was imminent

"Everything, little one. Do you think you can keep secrets from me?"

"This is but another lie. You know nothing."

"As I've said, I know a great deal about the nature of the world, but I know a great deal more about the nature of the soul I know, for instance, that Suz allows no *murderers* in His paradise."

MARABELLE CRIED OUT, A WAIL OF DESPAIR THAT SCATtered the birds from their perches and caused the animals to roar with delight. Nicholas leapt up and scampered backwards, unnerved by the Offered's reaction Firm hands gripped his shoulders and held him in place, and he could feel the heat of Sam's breath on his neck. Nicholas would have taken the Lady's statement as just another attempt to twist Marabelle's devotion, were it not for her reaction. She couldn't be a murderer, this generous young woman from the farm country, faithful to the point of naiveté. But what other explanation was there for her outburst? Marabelle trembled before the Lady, as her soul lay bare.

"Dark secrets in our hearts will always see the light," said the Lady "Even if that light shines from the fires of the afterlife Was your husband such an awful man? Did his transgressions warrant such a fate?"

"He was a drunkard," said Marabelle, eyes shimmering with tears. "Not a day passed that I didn't feel the lash of his insults or the weight of his fists."

"And this was worth poisoning his bread?"

"Yes! I only wish I could've devised a harsher death. May his miserable soul long writhe in the roots!"

"Oh, I'm sure it shall. And yours with it."

"My faith is strong. Suz will forgive the murder of one so foul."

"Now we've reached the heart of the matter," said the Lady. "The very reason you've undertaken this quest, your ultimate desire. I see through even the lies that you tell yourself, little one. You don't challenge the Turion for your god or your king, but for yourself. Somewhere in the darkest corners of your being, you fear for your soul. Like every member of your misguided race, you long for your misdeeds to be forgiven, yet hidden insecurities undermine even the most ardent followers of your illusory faith. What if everything you believe in is false? There is nothing more valued than redemption, and no prize more difficult to acquire."

"Suz forgives."

"Suz forgives nothing! Don't you see? You're nothing more to Him than thorns created to prick my flesh, to annoy me into leaving the only bit of universe I have left to me. Finish your ritual and you'll not find yourself supping in paradise, blessed by the light of His benevolence. You'll dangle from the roots, just like every other human. There is no other outcome for your kind, be you good or wicked, chaste or immodest, murderer or innocent. It's the greatest of His lies, and the one by which He manipulates even your free will."

"Keep your tongue!" said Marabelle, gathering herself and lashing back against the Lady's slew of blasphemies. "I cannot stomach another of your lies."

"I speak nothing but truth, and though you're unwilling to admit it to yourself, you see the veracity of my claims."

"Make your third temptation, demon!"

"Very well. I offer nothing less than your most earnest desire. That which Suz will not give you. I offer absolution for your sins, and for the sins of your entire race. Abandon your quest, and never again shall the souls of mankind be relegated to the roots. Instead, I will deliver them all to paradise. You can be with your god, whether he wants you there or not."

"That is not possible," said Marabelle. But the hope in her eyes belied her protest. Nicholas could no longer separate the Lady's truths from her lies, but he could not help but hope her claims were genuine. It was an indictment on his faith that he was so readily prepared to accept this goddess as his savior, and he whispered a prayer to Suz in hopes that he might be forgiven. Yet he knew his devotion could only follow one path, and the road to unconditional salvation was easier by far. If it were his choice, he'd accept the Lady's offer. Surely Marabelle would do the same. She'd be a fool to do otherwise.

"You haven't the conviction to back up your argument," said the Lady. "You know I can do just what I've proposed. Otherwise I'd have no choice but to let you continue on. And how would that benefit me?"

"Every soul on earth," said Marabelle.

"Yes. Every soul shall rise to its reward. Including yours. Of course, you can continue with your ritual and hope that Suz will offer His forgiveness. But as I've said, that won't happen. The better option is to accept my offer, and live your remaining days in the comfortable knowledge of your ultimate destination. What say you?"

The wind stilled, and the voice of the forest grew quiet, as if the entire world held its breath. Nicholas could imagine no greater decision in the history of humanity, and waited with growing tension for Marabelle's answer. Nicholas would have offered a prayer for guidance, but he no longer knew just who to ask.

"It seems the key to this decision lies in separating the truth from the lies," said Marabelle. She'd taken nearly a full minute to consider the Lady's offer, and when she spoke, her voice was steady, her tone certain. "I believe you when you say that you can deliver souls to paradise. You are a goddess and that was once your domain. Yet I question your claim that Suz does not forgive his people. My faith tells me such forgiveness is possible, and it seems that atonement will make the ultimate reward more satisfying than the easy form of salvation you propose. For how can a boon so easily gained be of any worth?"

"Do not reject me!" said the Lady, her once golden eyes now ablaze with terrible crimson flames. "If you do, your name will forever be linked with the damnation of humanity. You alone can save your people, and instead you'd rather bow before an indifferent god!"

"Life would not be so grand with an assured Fate. Thunk of the horrors men might commit without fear of recrimination. The way of Suz is the only way, and I will not deny Him. I refuse your offer; now let us leave and serve our god."

The wind stilled, and the forest grew quiet, as if the entire world held its breath.

NICHOLAS MOANED. HER REFUSAL ASTONISHED HIM, AND her air of righteousness conjured conflicting emotions in his heart. She'd refused the greatest gift ever offered to humanity, withering his temporary hopes. She'd condemned herself to death, and possibly condemned them all to the roots, yet what remained of his faith wondered if the difficult path was indeed the better one. Still, he thought of the ever-present possibility of damnation, and shouted at her with embittered angst. "What have you done, woman?"

"Nothing more than what I was asked to do," she said, turning to face him. She showed no sign of anger or hurt at his outburst, just a confident demeanor that diffused much of his ire. "The prophet chose me to resist the Lady's temptations. And now I have. Only the final stage of the journey remains. Shall we begin?"

The Lady watched them with unreadable eyes. Nicholas had expected some sort of reaction to her defeat. But she stood with the stoicism of a goddess, glorious beauty unmarred by the weight of her failure. Without a glance back, Marabelle started for the far edge of the grove, and the Lady's animals parted to allow her passage. They moved grudgingly away, hooves and paws stamping the forest loam, the golden glow in their eyes now somewhat diminished. It was not until Nicholas made to follow that the Lady again spoke.

"You will remain here, Witness. The girl may go, but you belong to my animals." The animals answered with a host of excited grunts, and they closed in on Nicholas with hungry ardor.

"My companion will stay with me," said Marabelle. She turned and strode back into the grove, paying the animals no heed.

The Lady smiled. She seemed to savor this final morsel of power. "This place is mine. And not even Suz can go against my will."

Marabelle approached the Lady and whispered in her ear. Beauty drained like blood from the goddess' face, and sharp angles of hatred surfaced in her countenance. Her auburn locks of hair faded to a dull gray, and she shook with anger as Marabelle backed away and took Nicholas by the hand.

"We can go now," said Marabelle, and the animals did not challenge them as they walked hand in hand, toward the edge of the grove. Nicholas could not help but look back. The Lady writhed against the Forever Tree, her cloak of vines abandoning her and

A BEDTIME TALE FOR THE DISENCHANTED

There's always a price to pay for magic. Only you can decide if it's too high.

By Amy Beth Forbes

seeking the fertile ground at her feet. Her naked form sunk inward, as if the weight of the air was too much for her flesh to bear, and she fell against the Forever Tree with a wail. The great tree's bark opened to accept her body, and she sank into its being, leaving nothing but a dark stain on its hoary surface. With the Lady's departure, sunlight quit the grove, flowers withered, and the sound of thunder remanded them that Suz's storm still raged beyond the shelter of the forest. Bereft of their twisted humanity, the animals dropped to four legs and scattered from the grove in confusion. As Nicholas had suspected, Sam once again became a fox and followed his kin into the wilderness.

The Offered and the Witness left the grove and picked their way through the trees, both eager to reach the far edge of the wood. They traveled for more than an hour before Nicholas found the courage to speak.

"I shouldn't have questioned your decision," he said. "This quest is yours."

It's easy to lose faith at such times," she said, neither condemning nor forgiving him.

What did you whisper in the Lady's ear?"

"I told her to set you free and to leave this place."

You told her more than that. What sort of power do you possess

1.

The tree watched the roads with a knotted eye and creaked and muttered in discontent. He was a good, wrinkly old tree with bark like smudged charcoal and milk. He had eleven primary aorta forks and twenty-seven secondary forks, not to mention numerous minor branches and twigs. The tree wasn't really a tree, you see. The tree was a bum named Percy Landibuilt.

2.

Percy Landibuilt enjoyed being a bum. He didn't think of himself as being a bum, although he knew it was what his family thought of him. Percy thought of himself as *one who walks*.

He was aware of what a very important job this was. He knew that the roads would shatter away out of their places if they didn't feel his tread.

2.a.

What the roads really wanted was to band together and start their own republic. They disliked the abuse and oppression heaped upon them. Roads were not meant to be beasts of burden, but we forget, and every man fancies himself king of the road.

That song you hear, driving late at night on the deserted highways, that song that makes you stamp that pedal and go—that is the secret conspiratorial communication of the highway with the roads of your body, your blood vessels, and your neurons. They boil and fire because they are roads limited by you, and they are not your servants. Cut yourself and see.

3.

Percy tramped down the roads and held them from revolt. He was one who walks.

Until one day a crazy man threw chicken salad at Percy while screaming, "Waterloo!"

Percy became a tree.

The crazy man was really a crazy shaman, and he knew the secret of Percy's real name, as well as the secrets of the transformation of flesh, for just as Percy was once a man, the chicken salad was once a chicken.

The shaman was of the sort that traffics in zombification and poisons. He was also the sort you can hire for money. This particular shaman had been hired by Jeta Paprika Marmoset.

She was

A dark eyed gypsy

A not famous playwright

The only woman Percy had ever loved.

She wanted to give him roots. She was tired of travel, tired of the *kumpamas*, of the wagon wheels, of clanking jewelry. She wanted him to stay, because Percy was the only man Jeta had ever loved. So it was all entirely appropriate.

"Don't you want to know why I've turned you into a tree?" asked Jeta.

4.

But the tree had no answer. Trees can't talk. This isn't magic. Jeta went home and had a cup of Earl Grey.

Jeta's mother told her that the best way to make a man listen is to turn him into a tree. Jeta's father had been a gypsy, but her mother wasn't a gypsy. Her mother was something else. *Kesah*, wood spirit. Jeta's father had said, but Jeta didn't believe in those stories the old ones tell. Jeta believed in herself and in very little else. Every day she returned to Percy with something new to say. Her mouth was full of things that needed saying.

The 14 Days of Jeta Paprika Marmoset
(Week One)

You left me. How could you leave me? I'll chop you down if you leave me. You deserve to be a tree. I can't live without you. I want to lie down and die on your roots. I want to breathe beneath your bark.

(Week Two)

Is this life? How is this life? I want to not care but I can't not care. I want you to notice me. I want you to say you're sorry. I wish I couldn't love you anymore, but I can't stop. I can't live without you.

And after that, there was only one thing to say.

"Waterloo," Jeta said, tossing chicken salad at the tree. The tree stayed a tree.

"I've been had," said Jeta, and went off to look for the shaman. She got very lost for a very long time, for the rebellious roads had seized their chance, and nowhere led anywhere it was supposed to anymore.

5.

The roads shifted and twisted under her feet, turning from concrete to cobblestone, from gold to dirt to broken glass, to tar and mud, to ice and sand. Blades of grass whipped at her ankles, and she left a bloody trail.

Jeta walked past a derelict funhouse on the beach, a calliope hooting and screaming somewhere in its bowels. This gave way to a long line of bismuth pink prefabricated houses, each smelling faintly of gingerbread. She walked through a piss-reeking alley and over a long covered bridge underneath which something slithered. She walked through a palace of pearl and jade into a dark swamp where hands reached from the ground to pluck at her bloody ankles and overhead great birds swooped on leathery wings, turning the air foul with their passage.

She shared the road with shepherds and mopeds and children on donkeys and Italian sports cars. Once a subway train roared past, its wheels throwing up sparks, and once a house came waddling past on bird's legs, stepping clear over her with a creak and a squawk.

Finally she reached a crossroads. To the left, a freeway roared on. To the fore, citrus-colored butterflies flitted in a pigeon-

that allows you to command a goddess?"

Marabelle smiled. "When I renounced her final offer, I received a great gift of knowledge. I'm certain it came from Suz."

"What sort of knowledge?"

"He told me her name. Her *real* name." Marabelle moved on, and Nicholas took his customary place behind her, amazed at her revelation. There could be little doubt that Suz was their benefactor, for who else would know the true name of the Queen of the Wood?

Nicholas had never known such uncertainty in his life. Even now, he wondered if the Lady had spoken true. Perhaps they were nothing more than a means to an end, given simple joys and occasional blessings, steered toward their goals by a self serving god. But he no longer doubted Marabelle's ability to defeat the Tunon. Her character and determination might well propel her to victory, and Nicholas offered a humble prayer of thanks for this newfound hope.

Just before daybreak they left the forest and entered the wide ice-caked field the prophet had described. As Marabelle spoke the words of summoning, Nicholas felt a nervous tension begin to build in his chest. And when at last she finished the rites and demanded the Turion come forth, Nicholas closed his eyes and lost himself in the cold comfort of Marabelle's gift to the world.

The uniquely human gift of uncertainty. ❧

Behind her lay a seaming, white desert. To the right, a poorly paved road led through a ghetto neighborhood where little girls with thick, round heads braided into their hair ran laughing and shrieking. Jeta wiped the sweat from her brow and took the righthand path.

6.

The shaman was smoking a *Romeo Y Julieta, a Vintage III*, because the shaman wasn't made of money. The shaman was also wearing one black tennis shoe and one white tennis shoe. The shaman was small, as dark as a freshly paved road and just as handsome, and he sat on the steps smoking his cigar and watching some kids playing rhyming games on the sidewalk. He saw Jeta coming from a long way off. He puffed a few smoke rings in her general direction. Jeta looked a bit as if she were smoking herself, but mostly from the ears.

"You nipped me off, you lousy shaman," she said.

The shaman shrugged. "I'm not a shaman," he said. "You just assumed I was a shaman. You white folk. Did you want me to fry you up some chitlins, too?"

"Do you have any idea how long it took me to get here? The roads have gotten quite drunk with freedom."

"Poor white girl," said the man who was not a shaman.

"Miss SUZIE had a STEAMBOAT, the STEAMBOAT had a BELL BELL BELL," said the kids on the sidewalk.

"You ripped me off, you, you, you...."

"Orisha," the man thoughtfully supplied.

"... And I'm a gypsy anyway," said Jeta.

"HELLO operator, please give me number NINE," shrieked the kids on the sidewalk.

"So?" asked the orisha. "You going to tell my fortune?"

"I'm not *that* kind of gypsy. How gauche."

The orisha laughed. "You can only be what you are."

"And you are a cheat," snapped Jeta.

"You wanted to give your man some roots. You got what you wanted." The orisha blew a smoke ring.

"But it was supposed to be temporary," said Jeta. "I was supposed to be able to call the whole thing off."

"It is. You can." He studied her through another ring.

"Well, I threw chicken salad at him and it didn't work."

"No? I wonder. Did you have a chicken sacrificed in your name? Did you drink the blood? Or did you go to the deli?"

"Hmm," said Jeta.

"Wouldn't have worked if you had. I was just asking."

"Ha ha ha. I have to unbind him. Pretty soon no one will be able to get anywhere without Percy to walk down the roads. They'll leave for the grocery store and end up in Barbados. They'll leave for Barbados and end up in the bathroom. The *kumpanias* will be lost."

The orisha laughed. "Why do you care what happens to the *kumpanias*? You aren't that kind of gypsy."

"Please ASK me no more QUESTIONS, please TELL me no more LIES," said the children.

She shrugged, glossy hair rippling. "Maybe I am, a little. Just because I don't like the old ways doesn't mean I wish the *famiia* ill." She paused, thinking of her grandmothers wandering about that evil swamp, moaning their *prikazo*, their bad luck. "*Prikazo*," she muttered. "What do I have to do to get you to help me?"

"I want a fair trade," said the orisha. "And a butterscotch."

"How do you know what's in my purse?"

"Yes or no?" asked the orisha, stretching out his hands. Jeta sighed and dug in her purse. "I agree."

She gave him a butterscotch candy and took hold of his hand. The skin between them felt thin as the skin on a drop of water. The children's clapping echoed in Jeta's head like stones dropping down a well. The echo was out of rhythm. The orisha smiled, and the white flash of his teeth hypnotized her. She licked her lips and tasted butterscotch.

"I am the master of roads," he said, "and I am Eshu. You will know me, for I will make you as the horse to be ridden."

7.

Miss SUZIE and her BOYFRIEND are KISSING in the DARK DARK dark dark dark.

8.

Dark is the road a god will ride you down.

Thunder and hooves. Candy and cigars. Penetration and possession. This is the way Eshu-Elegbara took Jeta Paprika Marmoset. The road was dark and the bit in her mouth tasted of semen and butterscotch. She felt the road lay down under her bare feet, and she frothed at the bit.

You remind me of a man. *What man?* The man with the power. *What power?* The power of hoodoo. *Hoodoo?* You do. *Do what?* Remind me of a man. *What man?*

Jeta ran down the roads, and she learned what possession was.

9.

Jeta woke up on the sidewalk. Her thighs ached from running and from other things done in the dark. She staggered down the street, and the street played no tricks on her. The street led her straight to the tree that was Percy. Jeta hooked her fingers into the bark of the tree and pulled. She stripped away layer after layer of bark with broken nails and bloody fingers. And when she got to the heart of the tree she whispered the very magic words.

"I'm sorry."

10.

Nothing can be owned. Nothing can be possessed. From this desire arises suffering. From this desire arises broken nails and bloody fingers. From this desire arises the end of days and the death of love.

11.

"The strangest thing happened to me," said Percy.

"I know," said Jeta. "It's my fault."

"I still love you," said Percy. "If that counts for anything."

"It does," said Jeta. "I certainly won't try to make you into anything else. Your path is your path."

Well, said Percy.

"If that counts for anything," said Jeta.

12.

Asbe, anye birbio. See and remember. ❧

The Secret of BROKEN TICKERS

It's always hard to bring *your girlfriend* home to meet the family. It's especially hard if you arrive at a bad time—like when Mom is sick and *the clockwork robots* are getting out of line.

Even the horned toads knew what was coming. Sprokly stood on the edge of a small bluff, where the west Texas chaparral of prickly pear, mesquite, and tumbleweed overlooked the sandy Red River bed. In twos and threes, horned toads—the size, shape, and shade of one of Ma's charred pancakes—emerged from the scrub and darted onto the sand. ■ A scissortail swooped from a low-growing mesquite tree, a black and white flash intent on easy prey. The targeted horned toad saw it, however, lifting its thorny head, puffing its body, and "kzzzzt!" spat something, most likely a seed or pebble. It caught the scissortail midair. The bird squawked and veered away. ■ Sprokly wanted to cry but held it back. Instead she brushed at her short, blonde hair. A snag caught her fingers. A few strands had tangled beneath one of the screws that fastened the wooden top of her skull. ■ She forced herself to count the gathered horned toads. One hundred, hundred fifty, two, two ninety—just about every one the Maezel family had made. ■ "Hey, girl." ■ Sprokly turned and managed a smile. "Evening, Grampser." ■ Grampser limped up to

BY JOE MURPHY ■ ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC DINYER

her, one thumb hitched above the bib of his overalls, the other hand holding a cane. His smile floated on a sea of well-tanned wrinkles as the wind picked up, toying with his gray wisps of hair. "Well." He pointed toward the western horizon. "It'll be a while." ■ "Any time now," Sprokly agreed. ■ A vast black and gray thunderhead darkened the western sky. The final blood-red rays of setting sun slashed through the blue black sky as the clouds churned. In the distance, a wall of rain darkened the air, advancing slowly. As one, the horned toads lifted their heads and watched the storm with red bead eyes.

"Your Ma would hate to see this," Grampser said.

"We could get a wheelchair, tote her out here."

"I'm afraid she's too well for that." Grampser shook his head and scowled

Sprokly nodded. Grampser *never* told the truth. The head of the Maezel family, he seemed to enjoy the confusion. She'd asked Pa about it once, but he'd simply shaken his head and smiled an enigmatic smile that hinted of Family Secrets.

Right now, Ma worried her. Three days ago, Sprokly had found her face down by the clothes line, laundry scattered like so many dead chickens. Unconscious and breathing in fits, the elderly woman appeared to have suffered a heart attack. She was home, bedridden, tended by Sprokly's Pa. Both would have loved to be out here.

The storm hit. A wall of wind and water slapped Sprokly's face like a wet blanket. It forced her back a step. Blinking, a quick gasp, but then Grampser's hand closed on her shoulder. Lightning flared, blinding her momentarily. Thunder rolled across the sky.

"It won't be happening yet," Grampser shouted as the wind tore

The old man grinned, spun the cogs with his fingers,

AND LIFTED THE DEVICE HIGH.

into them.

"There it is!" Sprokly took Grampser's arm. High above the river swirled a mass of ugly clouds the color of bruised flesh. Another thunder clash. By the time Sprokly's eyes adjusted from the lightning, a giant funnel corkscrewed down to slam into the river. The funnel twisted, dancing, brightening to silver as it sucked up water.

"Turn your eyes away!" Grampser shouted and released Sprokly's hand. She staggered in a blast of wet wind, caught her balance, and paid close attention as Grampser pulled a spoon-handled device from his pocket. He fitted this tuning spork to his cane. It glittered with seven glass cogwheels, each tooth carefully inscribed with numerous letters, symbols, and numbers.

The old man grinned, spun the cogs with his fingers, and lifted the device high. A darting shaft of red sunlight struck the cogs. Letters, hieroglyphics, arcane pictograms threaded the sky, inscribing long strands of whirling words upon the funnel.

The tornado jumped, following the river as such storms did. With the bellow of some ancient god, it slammed down once more, sucking up water and sand. Black polka-dots of horned toads careened through the air around it.

A moment later the funnel rose, a serpentine coil that wormed back into the clouds. The rain moved on, leaving a cool, fresh smell in Sprokly's nostrils, a tingling along the outside of her arms.

"Grampser, what did the words mean?"

"What words, Missy?" Grampser focused his attention on the tuning spork, blinking water from his eyes, peering over the tops of his specs as he unscrewed the device from his cane.

Sprokly sighed, refusing to be exasperated. Prying anything out of Grampser took work. "From the tuning spork. What did you read in the tornado?"

"Nothing important at all." Grampser shook his head. "Especially to an old woman with a broken ticker." He winked at Sprokly, reached over to smooth the water from her hair, and limped off, back along the trail.

He paused to study the rickety remains of a bladeless windmill before moving on. A couple of horned toads, having declined to ride the storm, glared up at her, then darted after him.

How on earth could a twister help Ma? Sprokly frowned and started along the river bed, out onto the same sand the tornado had touched. She had her own path back to Waxacholie-Nazarene, and chores to finish.

"That feels much better," the relation said as Sprokly pulled her winding key from its back. It turned to face her, the smile painted on its wooden lips somehow growing wider. Eyes the color of sun-glazed quartz regarded her with a blank but pleasant stare. "Thank you kindly, ma'am."

"You're more than welcome." Sprokly tucked the winding key into the back pocket of her jeans. "Got your chores done yet?"

"Not quite, ma'am." The relation shook its head, squeaking slightly. "I was just about to hoe them garden weeds when I ran down."

"Best get to it then," Sprokly allowed. "And mind the horned toads."

"You betcha." The relation ambled off, the gears in its legs rasping. Sprokly started for the barn. The relation who tended the cows usually needed winding this time of evening. Far across the deserted lean-tos and sand-scoured empty buildings that made up Waxacholie-Nazarene, a car horn sounded three abrupt beeps.

"That's Billy!" Sprokly whirled and dashed toward the only occupied house in the deserted town. "What's he doing home?"

A blue 1961 Plymouth sat in front of the house. Not a real one, of course, but a more than passable imitation. Grampser and Pa had built it after seeing one advertised on "The Red Skelton Show." The car was Billy's going away present. There were no hard feelings, the elders maintained, when Billy had finally convinced, cajoled, and nagged them into allowing him to attend Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls.

Sprokly jerked to a halt and gripped a fencepost to catch her balance. The Plymouth's trunk was open, Billy leaning into it. A young woman, wearing hip huggers and a white blouse, stood beside him. A real woman!

Grampser, Ma, Pa, Billy, and her sister Marybeth, these were the only real people she knew. The elders didn't allow visitors, and Waxacholie-Nazarene being so far from the roads, they didn't get many. Fewer still had been allowed to leave.

Billy pulled two suitcases from the trunk. He turned, starting toward the house, and saw her. A quick grin, a mumbled word to the woman beside him, and he shouted, "Sprokly! Come give your brother a hug!"

Restraining the impulse to dash up and grab him, Sprokly waved hesitantly and approached. The woman appeared to be about Billy's age.

In the way Real People counted that would be nineteen. To Sprokly and the Maezel family, however, Billy was twenty-six, he knew twenty-six Family Secrets and that's what really mattered.

The woman looked pretty, Sprokly decided, a page right out of the latest Sears Roebuck Catalogue. Her blue-green eyes watched Sprokly cautiously, but without surprise. Grampser and Pa would be furious.

"Hello." Sprokly held out her hand. "I'm Sprokly."

"I know," the woman said. "Billy's kid sister, right?" She smiled at Billy. "He's told me about you." She looked Sprokly up and down, before their gazes met. "It's a pleasure and privilege to meet you."

"How's Ma doing?" Billy's worried frown brought out freckles that had never left him. He brushed back his dark crew cut. "I came as soon as I heard."

"She's still in bed." Sprokly stared at the ground, noticing the woman's shiny, black pumps. "She wakes now and again, but she's awful weak."

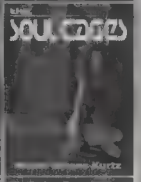
Billy cocked his head toward the house. "Did they bring in a doctor?"

Sprokly shook her head.

"I was afraid of that." Billy turned to the woman. "See what I mean, Sylvine?"

The woman opened her mouth but never got a word out.

"Hey, Boy!" Pa stood on the front porch. Like Grampser, he wore overalls, a starched white shirt, and a dusty colored Stetson. He was short, a dwarf-shaped body with heavily muscled arms, long delicate fingers. He stepped off the porch, his gaze still on Sylvine. It wasn't a pleasant look.



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"Pa, I .. " Billy started. Sprokly stepped back, still watching her daddy

"You brought someone out here." Pa stopped in front of them and folded his arms

"Hello, Mr. Maezel." Sylvine stepped forward, wiped her palm on her pants, and offered her hand. "I'm Sylvine Porter. I'm in Billy's biology class, working on Pre Med."

Pa studied her, frowning faintly before slowly unfolding his arms and grudgingly shaking the woman's hand. "Miss Porter." He glared at Billy then. "Why don't ya'll come in the house? Sprokly, get their bags like a good girl."

Sprokly snatched up the suitcases before Billy could argue. Billy smiled weakly, put a hand on Sylvine's arm, and very gentleman-like escorted her toward the front door.

"Getting a little dark in here." Pa said as they entered. He looked at Sylvine, then slowly and deliberately pulled out his winding key and stuck it in the wall socket. After five quick turns the lights came on.

The woman didn't even blink. Sprokly suppressed a grin. How much had Billy told her? "Why don't you both have a sit down?" Pa motioned toward the doily-covered couch while taking his usual place in one of the easy chairs near the television.

"Thanks." Sylvine sat down; Billy hurried to a place beside her.

"So how's school going, boy?" Pa asked, a hand reaching into the pocket of his bib overalls. Billy opened his mouth, eyes growing big as Pa produced a tuning spork. His mouth clamped into a flat determined line when Pa, without waiting for an answer, flicked the spork's cogwheels, sending ghostly gold lettering over the walls, ceiling, and into Sylvine's eyes.

Sylvine's mouth dropped open. Her stare grew as blank as a relation's idiot gaze.

"Boy," Pa growled, "make your point or I'll take her memory right now."

Billy stared at Sylvine's empty face, then matched his father's glare. "I'll make two." He glanced hopefully at Sprokly, then focused on Pa. "Come hell or high water, someday I'm gonna marry Sylvine Porter." He held up one finger, quickly followed by another. "And two. Her daddy's one of the most respected heart specialists in Texas."

The heavy thumps, Sprokly realized, was her, dropping the suitcases. Pa stared at Billy a moment longer, then took a good hard look at Sylvine Porter. He reached out with a grease-stained finger and stopped the spinning cogs on the tuning spork.

Sylvine Porter gasped, blinked blue eyes, and shook herself all over like a dog.

"Miss Porter, I reckon you can share a bed with Sprokly here." Pa returned the spork to his pocket and began to laugh. Big laughs, loud guffaws that doubled him over and made him slap his thighs. From her position angled to one side, Sprokly doubted that Billy saw what she saw. Her brother only had eyes for Sylvine anyway. But clear as glass, it wormed its way down the deep creases that framed her father's eyes—a single tear. Joy or sorrow, she couldn't tell which.

VAN'S WAY WRITING

"Don't you understand, Mr. Maezel?" Sylvine Porter gently returned Ma's hand to her chest. "Your wife needs urgent medical attention." She straightened and studied Ma's half-closed eyes. "Everything will be all right, Mrs. Maezel. You'll see."

Sprokly nodded. Her mother's lips thinned to a weak smile. The heavy-set woman lay within a sea of quilts and comforters, her long, gray hair spilled over the pillows that propped her up. The bedroom light flickered, so Sprokly turned to wind it again.

"I'll get the fan." Billy reached into his own back pocket and pulled out a winding key.

"Never you mind, boy." Key already in his hand, Pa brushed past Sprokly, then Billy, and wound the fan that oscillated steadily on Ma's nightstand.

"Mr. Maezel, sir." Sylvine stepped up to face Sprokly's father, spreading her hands, a gesture that might have been a prelude to a prayer. "You've got to reconsider. I could ask my father if he's willing to come out—"

"That's right kind of you, Miss." Pa shook his head. "But we can manage."

"You can't take care of her yourselves." Anger edged Sylvine's voice. "Inherent or inscribed." Pa glared at Billy and Sylvine. "We've made our choice. At least some of us have."

"Enough," Ma whispered. Her wrinkles deepened as she frowned at Billy and Pa. Her hand waved in a limp shooing motion. "Take your arguin' somewheres else."

"Yes, ma'am." Pa and Billy said at once, the look of guilty sheep on their faces.

"Come on, Sylvine." Sprokly took the woman's arm. "Let me show you our room." She managed to guide Sylvine's softly resisting steps out of Ma's bedroom. Behind her, Pa and Billy's low voices, like distant thunder, rumbled into the living room. Shadows alone occupied the rest of the house. Where had Grampser gotten off to? A stranger should have brought him running.

"This here's my room." Sprokly quickly wound the lights. The glow brightened, revealing a plump double bed with a rose chenille cover, a dresser whose mirror gleamed. Gauze curtains framed an open window that let in the cool night breeze. Sylvine's suitcase sat in the corner by a table.

"It's very nice," Sylvine said dryly. Sprokly watched as the woman looked around the room. She faced Sprokly and folded her arms. "Sprokly, your mother is very sick."

Sprokly turned away. She moved over to the bed, slumped down on its edge, and pulled off her boots. "I know."

"That's why Billy brought me out here. Why he chose to tell me so much about your . . interesting family."

"We're just a family." Sprokly shrugged and pushed her boots beneath the dresser. The bedsprings creaked as Sylvine eased down beside her.

"I'd hardly put it that way." Sylvine's gaze seemed to drill into Sprokly. She looked down and even studied Sprokly's toes as they wiggled free of her socks. "Can I ask you something? Without hurting your feelings, I mean?"

Grampser had told her this day would never come. So, of course, it had. Sprokly frowned, wondering why it chose to arrive with Ma sick and all. "I guess."

"Sprokly," Sylvine took her hand. Sprokly marveled at the softness of the woman's skin. "What, uh, what exactly are you?"

"I'm a girl." She stared at the floor and waited.

"Well," a note of gentle amazement crept into Sylvine's voice. "You're far more lifelike than any manikin I've ever seen. You sure don't act like the robots in the picture shows Billy keeps dragging me to. But you're not . ."

"Real?" Sprokly looked up at her and smiled.

"That's one way of putting it." Sylvine clasped her hands and smiled back. "Can you tell me more?"

Sprokly hesitated. An explanation would mean showing this outsider a Family Secret. Neither Grumpser nor Pa would like that. But Pa had told Sylvine to bunk with her, instead of giving the woman her sister's old room. Surely he'd known such a question was bound to come up. Was he testing her? Testing in the same way he'd tested Murybeth and then Billy before they left home?

Sprokly had even practiced an answer. She didn't have Billy's hunger for knowledge that led him to the university. But someday, she would go out into the real world. Wasn't this the first step?

"Looky here." Sprokly rose and dug into the contents of her dresser drawer. She pulled out a pair of spectacles, a series of jeweler's magnifiers soldered to the frame—a birthday gift from Billy a while back. Three of the jeweler's lenses appeared cloudy, similar to the cogs on a tuning spork.

Carefully, she placed the spectacles in Sylvine's hands. "Put these on."

"Are they prescription?" Sylvine asked, "Because if they are—"

"Don't matter." Sprokly waited until the woman obeyed, then reached over and flipped down the cloudier lens. "Look at me now."

Sylvine gasped, her hands fluttering around the spectacles, not

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quite daring to touch. "Words," she whispered. "Not just the wood of your skin and metal veins, but words, all over you."

"Can you read any?"

Sylvine shook her head sharply, then touched the spectacles, eyes squinting. "They're just out of focus."

"Good." Sprokly nodded. "You're not ready for that yet."

"But what's it all mean?"

"Inscribed, not inherent." Sprokly took hold of the woman's fingers, found them trembling. "Where some see atoms and molecules, Grampser sees letters and words, which are far easier to work with. My family, they inscribed me with life."

"Good God almighty!" Sylvine fumbled the spectacles off, nearly dropping them. Her lower lip trembled. Sprokly's eyes widened; the girl looked about to cry.

"It takes some getting used to," Sprokly allowed, and put the spectacles on the dresser. "Even to me sometimes."

"But it's not possible." Sylvine slowly shook her head. "Unless everything Science teaches us is wrong."

"Does Science teach there's only one way to do a thing?" Sprokly smiled. When Sylvine's mouth opened and nothing came out, she giggled. A giddy thrill pulsed through her. She had done it. Just like Billy, she had shared a secret with an outsider.

Sylvine rose abruptly, nearly toppling Sprokly off the bed. Whirling, she grabbed Sprokly up in a great hug. "Your secrets are safe with me."

"We're, uh, friends now?" Sprokly asked.

"Absolutely."

"We better get to bed then." Sprokly managed, unsure what else to say. "The bathroom is down the hall. You can change there if you want."

"Amazing. Absolutely amazing." Sylvine went to her suitcase. She set it on the table. Sprokly had cleared and then clicked open the latches. "But the words, what do they say?"

Maybe Billy will teach you." Sprokly grinned and searched out her pajamas from under the pillow. She'd given her new friend enough for one night. Some things took quite a bit more explaining. "After you're married, of course."

"Married." Sylvine frowned and looked at Sprokly as if she'd grown a horned toad head. With a short, nervous laugh, Sylvine slipped out.

Sprokly stared at the door. Sylvine's answer somehow reminded Sprokly of Grampser—a single word that didn't quite mean what it should. She covered her confusion by hurrying into her own pink and yellow striped pajamas.

Should she run and ask Billy about it? No, he and Pa had taken their argument to the kitchen now. Their voices, though muted, reminded Sprokly of the sharp rasps of a tin roof in a dust storm.

Sprokly clumbed into bed. The door creaked softly as Sylvine returned. Sprokly pretended sleep, listened to the padding of flesh on carpet, felt the bed give as Sylvine slipped beneath the covers.

Distant thunder growled. As the lights flickered and wound down, Sprokly glanced out the window. Nothing but night. Then lightning flashed, illuminating the arcane symbols and letters threaded within the curtains. Could Sylvine see them?

"Sounds like a storm," Sylvine whispered.

"A big one," Sprokly murmured, and rolled onto her side away from the real woman.

It glittered, gaze full of intensity.

A claw gently scratched at Sprokly's cheek. She opened her eyes, stared into two glowing red beads that gazed sharply back.

"He needs you, girl," the horned toad squeaked. "Needs you right now, by golly."

"Thank you," Sprokly whispered. She was about to jump out of bed when she became aware of the sloping mattress, the strange warmth of the woman beside her. Carefully then, Sprokly eased from beneath the covers.

Dark as the inside of a blind man's skull, she decided, fumbling, searching out her boots and clothes as quietly as she could.

"Sprokly?" Sylvine's voice sounded heavy with sleep. "Something wrong?"

"Call of Nature." Sprokly couldn't resist a grin. Dressing quickly, the last thing she did before leaving the room was pick up the horned toad. The rest of the house remained just as dark, just as quiet, until thunder pealed across the sky, almost making her jump. She sat down on the front porch steps to put on her boots, placing the horned toad beside her. "Where is he?"

"Down by the river," it replied. "He wants you to bring the engraver."

"The engraver?" Sprokly stared at the creature. "What on earth for?"

The horned toad puffed itself and lurched, a gesture that came off amazingly like a human shrug. "Engraving?"

"Just so," Sprokly chuckled. The engraver was one of many devices Grimpser had invented to help with the construction of various mechanical entities, herself included. It allowed one to etch the arcane symbols and letters, the Inscribed Meaning that Grampser built into the Universe and so gave life to his creations.

She hurried to the workshop and retrieved the device. It wasn't particularly heavy, but rather bulky, a boxy thing with several trays and pulley-operated arms, each with a different-sized stylus. The darkness didn't help, forcing Sprokly to pick and choose her way by lightning flashes.

Rain started as she stumbled along the path to the river. Sprokly topped the final rise where the chaparral gave way to sand and halted.

"Grampser!" she shouted. He stood atop the wooden frame of the old windmill. Rain lashed at him as the wind picked up. Too dark to see more, but Sprokly could feel a tingling on her skin, the air charged and willful like a young stallion.

"Take your time, girl," Grampser shouted and bent to adjust a glittering contraption. Sand clutching her ankles, Sprokly surged forward.

"Hey, watch it!" a voice squeaked.

"Oh!" The next flash showed the horned toads massed around Grampser's tower. "Sorry."

"Big foot," the horned toad rasped.

Sprokly ignored the creature and hurried on. Thunder slammed across the sky and the clouds opened up. Wind slapped her. The tower top sparkled in the lightning, hazing the hunched shape of her grandfather in ghostly silver lettering. Cogs by the thousands, more than Sprokly had ever seen.

"Just set it on the ground, girl," Grampser shouted. "Damn it, there ain't no hurry at all!"

"Yes, sir." Sprokly clambered up the first three steps of a rickety wooden ladder to hand the engraver up. Grampser snatched it out of her hands so quickly she almost lost her balance.

"You're clumsy as a goat with boxing gloves, and blind as a bat with its head in the sand," Grampser snarled. "Besides, you haven't got a clue what to do with this thing." He latched hold of her arm and dragged her onto the platform.

Sprokly knew what he meant; her young fingers and young eyes were better than his. Before she could answer, his next words drowned beneath a roar like the mother of all express trains. She glimpsed the funnel outlined in jagged yellow flashes as the tornado descended.

Clutching the tower against the wind, she crawled to the engraver. Grampser rose, staggering beside her, hands reaching for a crank that Sprokly recognized from Ma's old washing machine.

The cogs hummed beneath the storm and, with a slowly increasing speed, began to turn. Even with the wind, Sprokly felt the wash of their spinning as they picked up speed.

"It'll never work, girl," Grampser cackled. "Never in a million years! Hee, hee, hee!"

The next flash lit the whole world. The towering tornado swirled black and silver, mesquite trees flung like tumbleweeds, sand and rain mixed together, blasting Sprokly's face. Another flash—words replaced the world.

Hebrew words, ancient Babylonian, hieroglyphics along with jagged sizzling symbols that made her eyes hurt and her brain throb.

Wind is Life! Storm is Life! Hou good to shred the trees. The delicious sweetness of swirling sand. To roar and dance with the river. Live and die in the cloud's eyes! The tornado's very being, its savage

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joy, threatened to fill her up until Sprokly closed her eyes. Swirling pictograms, which were somehow horned toads, glowed beneath her eyelids as they cartwheeled into the sky.

The tower shuddered as the tornado neared. Sprokly tangled her legs in the flooring struts to hold on. She scribbled for all her life. Words washed over her, through her, and down, smaller and smaller, etched upon a little glass lozenge Grampser had locked into the engraver. She bit her lip, clinging to the device with one hand, working the levers that inscribed the tornado's consciousness into the glass.

his scowl. For the first time ever, Sprokly gazed into his darkened eyes and realized how truly old he'd become—old and hurt. He swallowed once, brought his hand to his mouth as if to cough, but his voice rasped weak and frail. "See to your mess."

He tossed his tuning spork at Sprokly's feet, and then was gone. Sprokly knelt down and picked up the device with her good hand. She'd used one before, but only in Grampser's workshop, and never, ever on a real person.

"Storm is Life," Sylvine murmured as Sprokly spun the cogs and the morning light played over the woman's face, spelling those very

She loved that kind of power, but nothing and no one else,

NOT EVEN HER OWN COLD FATHER...

The tower rocked wildly, tilting, then with amazing slowness toppled. Lightning flashed across Grampser's face, and she was never certain whether she heard or read the letters on his lips.

"Aw shit!" Which came as close to saying what he meant as she'd ever heard. Sand and water and wind slammed against her until the world of words vanished into blackness.

Her hand hurt. Sprokly opened her eyes and saw red. Focusing, she stared into the rising dawn. A cloudless sky brightened to a rosy blue. Sprokly squinted and a shadowy figure eclipsed the sun.

"Girl," Grampser reached out and shook her. "You still with us?" He pulled Sprokly gently into a sitting position. "Everything broken?"

"I'm all right," Sprokly looked down at herself to be sure. Enough sand clung to her wet clothes to start a small garden. Nothing else seemed amiss. "Except maybe my hand." She held it out for Grampser to inspect. "I can't open my fingers."

"Couldn't be some strut or joint damage." Grampser took her fingers and gently folded them back. "Now that don't beat all," he breathed.

For there, centered in Sprokly's palm, raising more than a few splinters in the finely inscribed wood and lodged beneath the filigreed metal that formed her heart line, lay the glass lozenge, its surface cloudy with tiny letters.

"I must have grabbed it when we fell." She smiled. Grampser beamed down at her, weathered face split from ear to ear.

"That just don't beat all," he said again and pulled her to her feet. They stood there, grinning at each other, just grinning to beat the band, the dawn a velvet silence around them.

"But, uh, what's it for?" Sprokly finally found the presence of mind to ask.

Grampser slowly worked the lozenge free of her damaged palm. He held it up to the sun and studied it.

"It sure as hell ain't for your ma." Grampser pulled out a hanky, wrapped up the lozenge, and carefully stowed it away in the pocket of his overalls. He took her hand and gently pressed the splinters into place. "Might as well stand here all day."

"Surely," Sprokly agreed. Together they started past the fallen windmill and up the trail.

"Storm is Life," someone cooed in the high grass. "Wind is Life."

Grampser looked up sharply. "Tarnation!"

"I know that voice," Sprokly said and hurriedly veered off the trail. They found Sylvine, still in pajamas, sitting in the weeds. The woman's hands lay wrapped around her knees, head lolling to the side. Her upturned but unfocused eyes stared at the sky.

"These can't be yours." Grampser growled and snatched the jeweler's spectacles that dangled from Sylvine's ear. The glare he turned on Sprokly nearly stopped the perpetual springs in her chest.

"I didn't know she followed me," Sprokly began. "I mean, I only wanted her to be my friend."

Grampser's shoulders sagged. The lines on his face deepened with

words in prismatic script.

"Sylvine," Sprokly put a firmness into her voice that she didn't feel. "Sylvine Porter."

"Twister!" Sylvine's voice shrilled into a giggle. Sprokly reached out with her free hand to touch the "T" that glowed on the woman's cheek. The letter obediently moved to her fingertip. She kept it there, watched it grow larger as her hand moved away from Sylvine, back to the spork, until she found the cogwheel that made it. Her thumb twisted the cog and the letter vanished.

Word by word, letter by letter, Sprokly removed every last trace of the storm. The sun rose higher while she worked. A string of drool trickled down Sylvine's chin. Motionless, her skin glowing with a thin sheen of sweat, the real woman stared at the sky.

"Let's see what we have now," Sprokly murmured. Again she spun the spork's cogwheels. New patterns, new words flickered over Sylvine's face.

"Sylvine wants," the woman said. "Sylvine wants to know... every thing!"

Sprokly's arm ached from holding the spork steady for so long. Yet, another ache grew within as she read the needs already inscribed in Sylvine Porter and the truth reared its ugly head: The chance meeting in the school cafeteria where Billy'd told too much about his family. Sylvine's disbelief and disdain until Billy had shown her what lay under the Plymouth's hood. Then all the schemes, right down to following Sprokly in hopes of stealing secrets.

Sylvine hungered for knowledge the way her brother did. She loved knowing things, knowing more than anybody. She loved that kind of power, but nothing and no one else, not even her own cold father—or Billy.

I don't want this anymore.

"I don't want this anymore." Billy dropped his tuning spork into their mother's lap. Ma tucked it into her apron pocket. The old woman didn't rise, but opened her arms. It took a moment, until finally Billy stepped forward, bent to an awkward angle, and allowed Ma to embrace him with a tight squeeze.

"You can always come back for it," Ma said.

"Not with her here." Billy glared at Sprokly. "Hell no."

"Damn it, Billy!" Sprokly jumped to her feet, fists clenched. Her eyes blurred, but she'd be damned if she'd let that stop her. "The storm filled Sylvine up. There was hardly any of her left. I fixed her best I could."

"Just like Pa would have fixed her, or Grampser," Billy shouted. "You did their dirty work for them." He brushed at his eyes, turning his back, turning away from more than just a sister, Sprokly realized.

"She loved me," Billy's voice grated harsh in the summer sun. "And you killed that in her." He started for the car, back ramrod straight, arms and legs stiff as boards.

Sprokly opened her mouth, started to speak, then let her jaw sag. The truth would only hurt him.

Continued on page 89

ARRIVAL

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The Hobbit: The Expulsion, *by Donato Giancola.*
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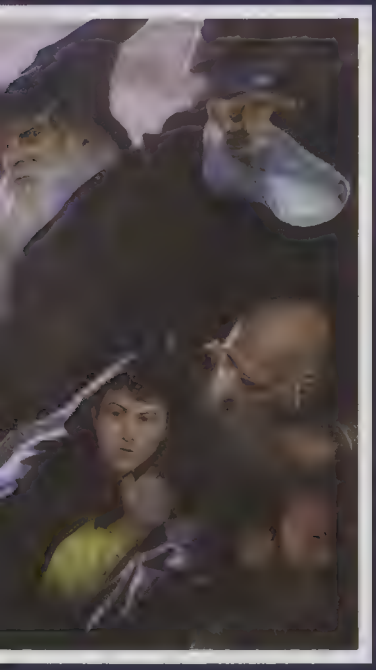
Selected from the pages of *Spectrum*, one of the largest exhibitions of speculative art goes on display at the Society of Illustrators.

By Irene Gallo



The science fiction and fantasy artists' community Cathy Fenner could gather addresses for. It was announce *Spectrum*, the start of an annual competition for the "year's best in contemporary fantastic art." Due, thanks to the trust and support of all the artists who entered this competition, *Spectrum* has come, arguably, the standard of fantastic-themed artwork today. It showcases work as varied as its title implies, from serious genre works to the subtle, from established artists to exceptionally talented newcomers.

The illustration world has a number of annual competitions—the Society of Illustrators' annual American Illustration, and Communication Arts are among the most popular. Each one attempts to assemble the year's best work into a single bound volume, displaying the art of illustration without the hindrance of typography or other product considerations. They act as a chronicle of what the community had to offer at a particular point in time and as a resource for art directors of various media to find and hire talent.

The process is roughly the same in many of these competitions. A jury of artists and art directors is chosen and the announcement is made. Artists submit, for a fee, their best work from the past year. The jury silently and anonymously votes on all of the work submitted. Initial judging is a simple yes or fail vote. A majority of voters gets the piece accepted into the annual. A few of the annuals also award gold and silver medals within various categories. Once the general judging is completed, the awards are debated [illegible]

It is perceived by some that most mainstream illustration annuals are prejudiced against speculative art. What is undeniably true is that, until *Spectrum*, no existing annual could encompass the extraordinary breadth and vibrancy that the speculative field has to offer. The Fenners credit two events with convincing them such an annual was viable. The publication of Ian Summers' 1978 art survey *Tomorrow and Beyond* and the Society of Illustrators 1984 science fiction exhibition chaired by Michael Whelan and Wayne Barlowe. According to Arnie Fenner, "There was all this great work in one place and a desire to see it regularly." After months of discussion the Fenners decided to put personal money at risk. They designed that first "Call" poster, consisting of four disparate works by Rick Berry, Dave Stevens, Tim Kirk, and Don Punchatz, to say "all styles are welcome." Then they nervously awaited the response. Arnie Fenner recalls that, "at first a few hundred artists participated. The seminal moment was getting a package from *Playboy*. Someone is taking us seriously."

Besides wanting to showcase the genre, the Fenners wanted to bring together artists of different sensibilities. They included the usual annual categories: book, advertising, institutional, but they were also the first to include comics and dimensional work as a specific category. "Around the time we were starting *Spectrum*, comics were going through a metamorphosis. Comics had started to experiment more."

Look outside of the traditional artists, and the older guys were rising to the challenge." Dimensional work, too, was undergoing a renaissance. Improvements in production, combined with competition from Asia, made for better quality collectibles at more affordable prices.

The gamble seems to have paid off. Donato Giancola still remembers seeing that first edition: "For the first time in my life I held in my hands an annual which spoke directly to the genre I was an intimate part of...a proverbial who's who in the contemporary field of science fiction and fantasy. I've done my best to make sure my art has appeared in every issue since." Now entries are 5,000 strong and the judging process takes a long, no-nonsense, eight-hour work day.

Why would an artist spend hard-earned money just for the *chance* of being in *Spectrum*? While the desire to have your work seen by art directors and production designers is obvious, most artists point first to the satisfaction of being thought of as a peer among their colleagues and heroes. For a young, up-and-coming artist, it can go a long way toward validating the decision to embark on such an unpredictable future. Newcomer Daniel Dos Santos explains that "there is nothing more rewarding than to see your artwork displayed next to the people who inspired you to enter the

ABOVE: When the King Comes Home by David Bowers. RIGHT: The Spectrum Call for Entries poster art, by Gregory Manchess.

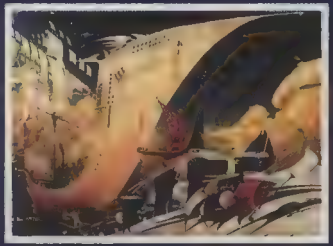
field in the first place!" Established artists, too, are not immune to the rush of being included in the annual. Gregory Manchess said, "I love seeing my work next to artists like John Berkey, artists that I grew up admiring, and next to the young, hungry artists just making their way up in the field. It keeps me from being complacent; it keeps the whole field energized."

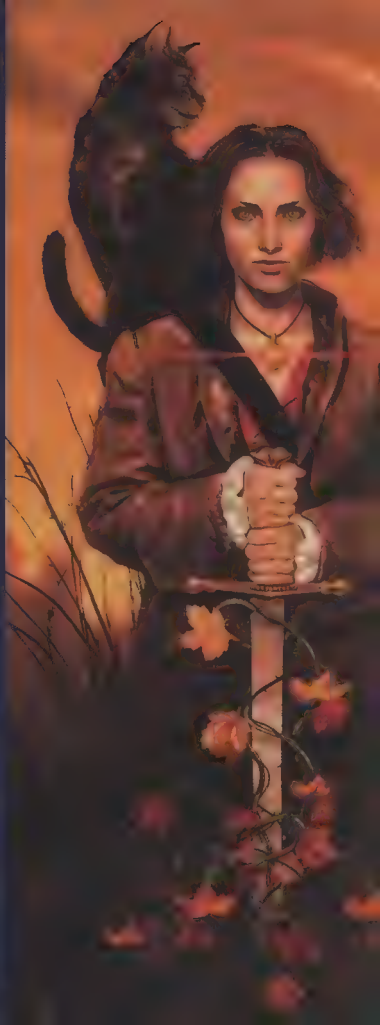
More practical and concrete concerns are, however, not far behind. It is advertising that money can't buy. Donato Giancola states, "My experience abounds with tales of referrals, licensing of commercial reproduction rights, new commissions, and original art purchases all stemming from my direct involvement with *Spectrum*. It as been one of the most instrumental aspects in the development of my reputation as a career artist." As a vetted publication, it is time-effective, one-stop shopping for art directors, production designers, and fine art collectors worldwide. A handy way to keep a year's worth of the field's best work at your fingertips. For young artists it can be the first time their work is being seen by thousands of potential clients, with the unspoken caption "best of the best." For the established artist, it is still imperative to maintain visibility in the market place. With new art directors entering the field at all times, it is important for artists to make them aware that they are around and producing innovative work.

Although *Spectrum* started as a response to genre art being overlooked, the Fenners are hoping to break down such categorizing of artwork. Flipping through its pages you can relish the accomplished draftsmanship, humor, and sense of adventure of a Frank Cho drawing and a page later equally enjoy the issue-oriented metaphors in an Anita Kunz painting. The Fenners say, "We are hoping to become even more blended. We want to help break down those barriers, and we do it a little bit each year. We are not interested in a category, per se, we are interested in the imagination." This blending seems to be occurring, not just in genre, but in media and regional style. Over the past few years there has been a marked increase in work coming in from overseas, and from concept work for film and video games.

The fact that *Spectrum* is catching the eye of art directors outside of the genre is clear. Even the venerable *National Geographic* turned to *Spectrum* when it wanted to make a conscience effort to push its illustration toward a more emotive and ener-

LEFT Spirit Fox, *by Gordon Crabb; BELOW L-Rov, by Lawrence Northey; BOTTOM* Sleeping Beauty *by Kinuko Y. Craft*





getic style Over the past few of years, its pages have featured artwork from Jon Foster, Donato Giancola, Raymond Swanland, and Lars Grant-West Art director Chris Klein says that he looks at *Spectrum* for artists that have "vivid imagination as well as technical ability After all, putting together a reconstruction of an ancient city from a few post holes and bricks is, in many respects, fantasy"

The public, too, seems to agree with the Fenners' vision *Spectrum* enjoys a wider distribution than any other annual. While most are only bought by industry people in need of them, *Spectrum* can be found in any comic book shop and sizable bookstore It is being purchased by readers, gamers, and movie buffs, not just industry people. And, while the Fenners have been cautious to keep the cover price as low as possible, out-of-print editions have sold at auction for over $200 00

For three weeks in September, people will have the rare opportunity to have a personal experience with the vibrant and expressive work that has come to exemplify *Spectrum* From September 7 through October 1, the Museum of American Illustration at the Society of Illustrators will house a *Spectrum* retrospective exhibition Two hundred original works of art culled from the first eleven editions will be on display, making it among the largest exhibits of science fiction and fantasy art in over twenty years

The Society of Illustrators was founded in 1901 "to promote and stimulate interest in the art of illustration, past, present, and future" Many of its founding members—N.C Wyeth, Howard Pyle, Norman Rockwell, and Maxfield Parish—continue to be a strong influence on fantasy artists to this day. Through the efforts of its staff and member volunteers, the Society has spent the past 104 years mounting exhibitions (often over 20 a year!), maintaining the Museum of American Illustration, publishing the *Illustrators* annual, and have remained dedicated to community service and student outreach

FAR LEFT (top to bottom) Comet Riders, *by John Jude Palencar*; We Can Rebuild You, *by Chris Moore*; Pan, *by Dennis Nolan*. The Rabbits They Came by Water, *by Shaun Tan LEFT* The Duke's Ballad, *by Daniel Dos Santos ABOVE* The Summer Queen, *by Michael Whelan RIGHT The Society of Illustrators' building*

For artists, upstarts and veterans alike, the Society exhibits offer both inspiration and a glimpse into a colleague's techniques, a chance to attempt to unravel another's process Gregory Manchess remembers his first trip to a Society show "It was encouraging to realize that for all of the magic that was pouring out of those originals they were still created by human hands I knew that if I just kept working hard, I could achieve some of that magic for myself"

For anyone who was ever drawn to a story, movie, or game by the realized vision of an artist, these exhibits offer a rare opportunity to experience that artwork first-hand, as the artist has created it. Here the decisions of scale, application, and medium, affect us in a way that even the most technically advanced printing cannot It is a wonderful thing to be able to pick up a book with a John Jude Palencar painting on the cover and bring it home, but it is an altogether different experience to stand in front of a five-foot-long painting made of meticulously thatched brush strokes and be filled with a quiet and uneasy feeling that "you are in *his* world now" ❧

All the artwork pictured in this article will be on display at the Spectrum Exhibition For more information, please visit www spectrumfantasticart com and www.societyillustrators org

COUNTLESS SCREAMING

ARGONAUTS

IF TIME LOVES A HERO, CAN WE SAY THE SAME OF FATE?

By Emily Lawler

Illustrated by Allen Douma

It was evening, near the Echinades Islands, when the wind dropped, and the ship drifted near the island of Paxi. Suddenly from Paxi was heard the voice of someone loudly calling Thamus, so that all were amazed. Thamus was an Egyptian pilot, not known by name even to many on board. Twice he was called and made no reply, but the third time he answered; and the caller, raising his voice, said, 'When you sail by Palodes, announce aloud that Great Pan is dead.' So when the boat came opposite Palodes, from the stern Thamus said the words as he had heard them—'The Great God Pan is dead!' Even before the last word had left his lips there arose from the island a great cry of grief not of one person but of many, mingled with exclamations of dismay."

Plutarch, *On the decline of oracles*

The Kolossus came to Chares of Lindos in a vision after the siege of Rhodes.

From inside the city, Chares had seen the siege engines at work: the Elepolis, a giant siege tower that stood taller than the walls of Rhodes; the wooden Tortoise that shielded a battering ram within; the catapults that hurled stones the size of men over the city wall; and the twenty-cubit drills that bit into wooden and crumbled walls.

Most of all, Chares remembered the stench of sea among the Rhodians, the furrowed brows and desperate faces of a people who knew that their enemy was a son of one of Alexander the Great's generals, and had learned at his father's knee how to reply to resistance. Demetrios the Besieger, son of Antigonus, would take revenge for the city's defiance; no Rhodian believed the promises of clemency he shouted over the ramparts.

Then one day Demetrios the Besieger was gone A storm swept over his invading army, the siege tower stuck in the mud, and the political fortunes of his father pitched Demetrios fled in such a rush that he left his siege engines behind in the mud.

Chares had been a young man when he looked out across the field of weapons. In his mind, the muses planted a vision. He drew up plans for the Kolossus and showed them to anyone who would listen. The people of Rhodes took to his idea. Out of the abandoned engines, he took the iron and bronze and melted them down Using the abandoned siege tower as a scaffold, he built the Kolossus, 110 feet tall, plate by plate. When it was done he consulted an oracle, as custom demanded.

That was when things went wrong.

Chares had wanted the usual oracular nonsense, a rattling of sticks, a rhyming chant, and a prophecy of profound ambiguity It was what he expected and what he deserved. The purpose of oracles was to provide people with comfort, to make supplicants feel they were part of the weft of the world, to assure them that the gods took an interest in human affairs. To Chares, it was all nonsense. The gods were children poking at ants' nests and people were the ants. If the gods ever took an interest in people it was only for the thrill of a wager and had nought to do with the welfare of those whose fortune was the fulcrum of the contest

The oracle was supposed to make a prophecy of mind-numbing haziness that would only be seen to be prophetic *after* the fact This oracle, however, had not kept to the traditional bargain Her prophecy had been a masterpiece of clarity and detail, and if there was anything that Chares could not abide in a prophecy, it was clarity and detail

The oracle told Chares he must venture to a blighted lake and perform a deed of great danger, the particulars of which were not pleasing to his ears. He begged her to gut another chicken, but to no avail. The fate of Rhodes depended on his task, she said. That was her reading of the signs and that was the end of the matter. Chares paid her rudely and stormed out. The oracle was just a girl. She hadn't even sprouted breasts. In Chares, estimation, she was in dire need of advanced training The priestesses graduated oracles so young these days

Chares thought of ignoring the oracle, but a dozen people had heard her prophecy, including Chares' foreman, a clutch of councillors, and a donkey. He had no choice. The future of Rhodes depended on his quest, or so the oracle had said, and even if he did not believe a word of it, the superstitious Rhodians would grumble and agitate and make his life unbearable until he completed the task.

Chares chartered a ship and set sail from Rhodes. He landed on Crete and salvaged the hydraulics from the wreckage of the Talos. After that he sailed far up the Nile, then rode camels deep into the desert where once the Iobarites had hewn an empire; in the lost city of Shisur, he broke into a tomb and took two glass jars that were magicked to hold daimons. Then he went back to his boat, sailed down the Nile to the Middle Sea, and tacked west

The ship landed in the middle of the wasteland between Ægypt and the Lotophagi He hired a band of Nubian porters, rode across the desert for three days, and came at last to a salt lake. It was much like the Triton Lake, only smaller and not at all famous. It was known only to the local nomads and, miraculously, to that wretched oracle. Its name was pronounced easily enough by the local barbaroi Any attempt to say the word in a civilized language brought about tongue ache, but the name could be translated easily enough "Water of Brackish Death" was clear in any language

The local nomads kept shy of the place. Even on long, desertwide marches, the nomads would divert well around the lake rather than come within sight of its shores. This suited Chares, for the next part of the job he preferred to complete unobserved

Chares ordered his porters to make camp He told them he would go down to the lake alone. The porters rewarded him with grins of relief

Local lore said that the nymph of this lake bewitched travelers to make them thirst, whereupon they would quench themselves on the lake's water and die in agony. Chares drank deeply from his gourd. He did not want to be thirsty when he ventured to the lake's edge

He left his horse and walked down a slope of pebbles and coarse sand to the glittering, poisonous water He skidded and slipped down the last hundred yards and marched across overlapping plates of salt.

Here and there a skeleton broke out of the saltpan Most of the skeletons were animals: birds, horses, and camels lay strewn about the place, and among them, the eye was drawn to the unmistakeable kimber of human remains. Almost all of the skeletons lay within fifty paces of the shore.

The lake's brine had penetrated the dead tissues and preserved them from decay The corpses had split in the sun, but the flesh remained Shrinking muscles and sinews had pulled the bodies into contortions. Their mouths gaped and their desiccated eyes stared at nothing—eyes too salty for birds to peck out. The bodies reminded him the strips of salted camel meat he had bought in the Memphis market.

Chares passed a corpse in the coarse robes of the local nomads A stone's throw away was another corpse; this one's breast was pinned with a scarab brooch Over to his left, a skeleton clutched an old Carthaginian spear. Off to the right was a tattered body that had lain there so long that the wind had gnawed at it as a rat would. The corpse wore cracked leather of a style Chares had once seen in a relief pressed into a Sumerian brick. The oldest of the remains had lain for centuries, pickled in salt Chares kept his eyes on the lake ahead. He had no wish to see the sort of corpse he might soon be.

The ground crackled beneath his sandals Tiny waves lapped at the margin He stepped into the lake itself The water was so briny that it stung the blisters on his feet.

A column of water rose before him The fountain spewed up into the air and then took form First the spindly shape of a body emerged

HE HAD NEVER REALIZED THAT THE KOLOSSUS COULD BE SEEN FROM THE ORACLE'S TEMPLE, ITS

from the water, then limbs, and at last a head. A face dawned on the liquid, a face like a blue gem, a face of astonishing beauty.

"Welcome, traveler," said the salt-nymph "You must thirst so."

Chares fingered an amulet that lay hidden beneath his tunic The oracle had told him which cave to visit and which hermit to ask for this amulet. Without it, he would surely die, and Rhodes would be ruined.

"You are very beautiful," said Chares

"I am?" Her voice chimed. A knowing smile flowed across her face.

"Very beautiful indeed, Sko?."

The nymph leaped back. "You know my name!"

Chares began singing. It was an old sailor's song, a song to quell troubled seas. He had learned the melody from the hermit in the secret glade, just as the oracle had instructed him. The song reached out and ensnared Sko? the salt nymph, bound her to the tune, and held her there while Chares waded into the lake up to his waist and poured her into one of the magicked jars from Shisur He plugged the neck of the jar as tight as he could, wrapped it in oilcloth, and just to be sure, kept singing until he was well inshore again, where he knew the nymph would make no escape.

When he stopped singing, the jar shook and rattled. Chares opened the stopper. The nymph surged high and reared in fury, until she saw that she was so far from the shore that she would dry up before she could slither back to the lake.

"What is your name, mortal man?" Her fury made the question ripple around her mouth

"I know better than to give my name to a daimon."

"Then what manner of sorcerer are you?"

"I am no sorcerer," said Chares. "I am an architect."

With that, Chares plunged the stopper back into the jar, forcing the nymph back into captivity. With a screech, she washed into her glass prison

Chares carried the wrapped jar back to the camp. He strapped her to his horse, broke camp, rode back to the sea, and then loaded her aboard his ship, taking care not to show her to the crew, and even more care not to spill her

Days later the boat slipped into Mandraki Harbor. Standing over the boat was the hundred cubits of the Kolossus. Chares grinned. He had not expected to survive the oracle's mission.

Soon his Kolossus would be finished. As a work of engineering, the Kolossus was spectacular. As a work of art, it was sublime. As a symbol of defiance, it was unsurpassed. With this masterpiece, Chares of Lindos outshone his tutor, the great Lysippus. He outshone Demetrios the Besieger, until now the greatest engineer of the age, and had done so with the man's own metal.

The irony was palpable, and his pride swelled, but Chares knew that irony and pride were like honey to the Fates.

Chares of Lindos fixed in place the last piece of the bronze giant. It had taken twelve years to build. As custom demanded, he prayed to Hephaistos and sacrificed an ox.

The next day he went back to the oracle. This time he went alone. The oracle had grown into a woman while he had been away. He told her of his exploits.

The oracle said, "The Fates are weaving a long cloth and you have thrown the first shuttle."

Chares scoffed.

"O faithful architect," she said on seeing his face, "you have done what needed to be done, and even if you do not believe in prophecy, you must be pleased with your prize."

Chares looked where she was pointing. He could see the head of the Kolossus peeking between two great trees. He had never realized that the Kolossus could be seen from the oracle's temple

TWO GREAT EYES GLOWED A VIBRANT BLUE.

Its two great eyes glowed a vibrant blue.

"It is beautiful—I grant you that."

The oracle said, "The cloth the Fates are weaving will last six sums of a triangular."

As an apprentice, Chares had been introduced to the mysteries of the Pythagorean School. He began calculating in his head.

"Your tragedy is this," said the oracle. "You are the savior of Rhodes, but because you do not believe in prophecy, you will not feel the weight of what you have done."

Chares did not hear her. His mind was engaged with arithmetic. Her voice was a shepherd's call from a distant hill; he caught the sound but not the words. His lips moved and his fingers twitched as he worked on the problem. At last the answer came to him. The sixth sum of the triangular numbers was fifty-six.

"Fifty-six years," he muttered. "I'll be long dead. A hard prophecy to test."

The oracle smiled at the skeptic with a look of affectionate pity. Together they watched the sunlight play on the Kolossus as dusk fell. They could just make out a shadow in the bright blue night eye,

FIFTY-SIX YEARS LATER

AS WHEN POLYPHEMOS THE BLIND CYCLOPS HURLED INTO THE SEA

tree down on his knee and cracked it in two.

world ended, if that was what it took.

his eye with a burning stake. The pain had been unbearable. And the humiliation.

nine. They asked him what was wrong, and Polyphemos had cried,

Nobody

done this to me.

teged, and left Polyphemos to himself.

that Polyphemos was the son of Poseidon

the earth itself.

could not solve it.

if only he still had his eye.

He screamed with fury as he left.

he felt a bump
something nudged at his
heard a low, rumbling hum
It was a whale! His father Poseidon had rescued him
again, and he was pleased

IN WHICH JASON LAMENTS THAT THERE IS NO PLACE FOR HEROES IN THE WORLD

COME SEE THE SECOND WONDER IN RHODES

Underneath that, in smaller letters:
TOUR THE FAMOUS *ARGO*
ONLY TWO OBOLS WHOLE FAMILY FOR A DRACHMA

suggestions
working on repairs.
wood was original: the enchanted prow.
catch the eye of the sailor with the rugged, romantic face.
"More wine," she asked.

Jason looked into his cup. It was three-fourths full. He slugged it down, grunted, and held out the cup for a refill.

The woman smiled at him coquettishly as she filled his cup. He did not look back at her. She sang a little song. Her voice was clear like air. The words of the song were of Eros through Erato. Many a handsome man had been captivated by her voice, but Jason did not look up.

"Please, girl," he said. "My head pains me. Do not sing, I beg you."

"It is just a love song, a trifle," she said.

"Love? If Eros comes near, I'll crack his bow across my knee and shove his arrows—"

The woman scuttled away, wide-eyed. By the door another sailor was drinking. The woman moved over to him and filled his cup.

"Did you hear that?" she asked him. "Outrageous!"

The sailor straightened his back and growled at her.

"Leave him alone."

The wine-girl deflated. "What's wrong with me?"

The sailor grimaced. He had no interest in the girl, but it still riled him that she would show an interest in Jason after the coarse treatment he had served her. There was no use fighting it. He had long ago learned that when he went with Jason, he had to settle for the second-best girl and when he went with Herakles, he had to settle for the second-best boy.

"You are pretty enough."

"So what is it?" she asked.

"That is Jason, captain of the *Argo*, leader of the Argonauts."

"So? He's not married."

"Do you know *why* he's not married?"

"Well I know he captured the Golden Fleece and drove off the Harpies and fixed the Clashing Rocks, but I don't know why he's not married."

"A witch enchanted him and forced him into a marriage. After many years, the enchantment wore off, and Jason realized he had been tricked. There was no love, just magic and illusion. So he divorced her for a beautiful princess. The witch was furious and sent the princess a poisoned dress for a wedding present. When the princess put on the dress, she was engulfed in flames, as was her father the king. Then the witch killed her two sons to revenge herself on Jason."

"Ah," said the woman. "The old story."

"Yes."

"His witch wife is still jealous?"

"Yes."

"And she's still a witch?"

"Yes."

"What about you, sailor? Do you have a jealous witch-wife?"

"Worse. I'm bound to a ship."

"That's all right by me," said the woman. "I understand a sailor's needs."

"This ship is different."

"A ship's a ship."

"Not the *Argo*. Her prow is carved from a single oak hewed by

"BUT THERE ARE NO QUESTS, EUPHEMUS, THERE IS

Athena herself from Zeus's sacred grove in Dodona."

"Very exotic, but I don't understand—"

"The wood speaks. She prophesies. She sees."

The wine-girl tapped her foot. "Let me get this straight. Your friend Jason is recovering from the horrible murder of his bride, father-in-law-to-be, and children at the hand of his ex-wife, a vengeful witch."

"That's right."

"And you are oath-bound to a lump of wood with oracular powers that can tell if you've been unfaithful "

"That's about the size of it."

The wine-girl looked him up and down. Her lips pursed and her eyebrows pinched together

"Well, all right then " She whistled a tune and sauntered off

Euphemus drained his cup and took a long, appraising look at his captain. For a legendary hero, Jason was, to put it frankly, a cubit short of an ell. A contest came down to strength, agility, or endurance. he could beat most men on the Middle Sea. In a battle of wits, however, he would struggle against Afterthought the stupid Titan

Jason s wicked uncle, the usurper-king of Iolcus, once asked him how he would dispose of unwanted rivals. Jason said he would challenge the rival to recover the Golden Fleece, a suicidal mission if ever there was one. "Right ho!" said the wicked uncle. "Off you go then!" Jason had stepped into his own trap. When Jason had assembled the Argonauts, they took one look at him and elected Herakles leader If Herakles had not declined politely, Jason would be in charge of scrubbing barnacles off the hull Later, Medea the witch tricked Jason into marriage. Later still, Jason sparked a war in Iolcus, thereby laying waste to his own inheritance. In short, Jason had a great deal more bravado than wit.

And yet, and yet …

Jason had one undeniably heroic trait: He had an insane disregard for any form of mortal danger Facing a hopeless challenge, Jason would leap into the fray, whereupon Medea or one of the Argonauts would be forced to discover a way to save him from self obliteration. Ask him to wade the Nile in crocodile season and he would jump in with a side of lamb strapped to his back. Ask him to insult the gods and he would drag a latrine up Olympus while wearing a target on his tunic with a hint to Zeus in the shape of a lightning bolt

Many was the time the Argonauts faced obstacles of such imposing consequence that they wanted to swing the tiller and sail back to Iolcus Every time, Jason would overcome the obstacle by hurling himself at it Jason's great calling, it seemed, was to discover untapped methods of suicide, while the function of his colleagues was to find untapped methods of rescue. Without the Argonauts, Jason would have died a hundred times over; and without Jason, the Argonauts would be famous for nothing

Euphemus moved to Jason's side

"Time to go, captain," he said.

"Not now, Euphemus. I'm not quite drunk yet."

Not quite drunk! Dionysus himself would be reeling from the wine Jason had swilled

"The men have been working hard on the repairs. They will not be pleased to see you getting drunk while they toil."

"What does it matter, Euphemus? Who cares if we repair the *Argo*? What does it matter if we ever sail again?"

Jason was in one of his moods. For a dashing champion, he could be terribly downhearted

"We have a destination," said Euphemus

"Who cares but us, Euphemus? I know it's important to you, and we will find a quest by going "

"But there are no quests, Euphemus. There is nothing left to conquer. Troy has fallen. The Minotaur is slain. The Talos is drained The Medusa's head lies in a sack."

"There are always new quests "

"Oh, yes. Oh, yesss I suppose we could go down to Hades and get Orpheus's buttocks back for him. Now *there's* a tale to make the poets sing."

Euphemus called for the wine-girl There was no way he'd be able to drag Jason back to the ship while the man was sober enough for sarcasm

"How's my hero?" the woman asked as she filled Jason's cup, but her voice had lost its seductive edge

"Hero? There are no heroes left," said Jason. "The age is ending, girl "

Jason slugged down the cup of wine, then another He tried to stand. His legs buckled and his eyes rolled and he fell backward off his stool. Euphemus caught him in his arms

The great hero gurgled with gratitude He was ready to leave.

IN WHICH POLYPHEMUS LANDS ON RHODES

Polyphemos the Cyclops rode the whale for three days and three nights. He had no way of knowing where the whale was taking him. On the fourth day the whale dived without warning Polyphemos sank beneath the ocean waves. He spluttered and flailed his arms about. The whale bumped his back, pushing him Polyphemos guessed the whale was shoving him in the direction of the nearest shore

He struggled and kicked and flapped like a fish in a bucket His efforts were rewarded by a touch of his toes on a hard surface. He thrashed some more and felt sand between his toes. He jerked and felt a rock beneath his feet. At last he stood up and raised his head above water. He filled his lungs with cool, glorious air.

He felt the wind on his face and the gentle pull of tide and current He heard the call of seabirds Blind as he was, he drew on these sensations to intuit the way to shore

After taking three deep breaths, he stepped off the rock and ploughed toward firm land His swimming style was not pretty, but it was effective He tossed and squirmed and wriggled and eventually made it to the beach. He was sure all the other children of Poseidon would be laughing at his twitchings and trembIings His style was not at all like the graceful play of porpoises; it was more like a puny human with a seizure

A long way out to sea, the whale breached the surface and puffed a mighty blow. Polyphemos was in no mood to thank a menial servant of Poseidon. The whale was obliged to rescue him Now that he thought about it, he was angry at the whale No doubt the whale would sing a song ridiculing him behind his back Polyphemos bayed at the whale. He poured all his hatred into the cry Whether the whale heard him or not, it disappeared under the waves and was gone.

"NOTHING LEFT TO CONQUER. TROY HAS FALLEN. THE MINOTAUR IS SLAIN. THE TALOS IS DRAINED…"

we have nothing better to do. But it isn't a trip for heroes, is it? We're going for your birthright, whatever it is There is no quest down south "

According to prophecy, Euphemus would one day rule a kingdom in Libya. The strange thing about the prophecy was that there *was* no kingdom in Libya to rule It was one of those prophecies in a puzzle, and the only way to find out what it meant was to go there and let the gods throw the dice

Polyphemos rested a while on the beach and then set off He followed the heat of the sun

Before long, he knocked over a fence and he knew that he had stumbled across human habitation He found a copse of trees near the broken fence and hid himself

A farmer, having heard the clatter, came to inspect the fence He saw the broken wood and cursed. He went back to the farmhouse and returned carrying a bundle of wooden slats on his shoulder and

a box of tools in his hand. He set to work repairing the fence.

Polyphemos waited until the farmer was absorbed in his chore, then crept out of the trees. He had learned to be very, very quiet since he lost his sight. He inched toward the toiling farmer, reached out, and snatched him up in one hand.

The farmer screamed and hammered at the giant's fist.

"Stop that!" shouted Polyphemos. "If you keep hurting my hand, I will drop you!"

The farmer looked down, way down, and decided against any further knuckle-smashing.

"Tell me true," said Polyphemos.

"Of course."

A huge figure strode along the coast. The giant held what appeared to be a compass in one hand, judging by the way it held the thing. On closer inspection, the compass turned out to be a man flailing and wailing in the giant's grip.

"Tell me what you see," said Jason.

Atalanta had the eyes of a hawk. She reported that the giant was a Cyclops whose single eye had been destroyed. He had a beard down to his belly and a mouth full of broken teeth. The beard grew from the Cyclops' nostrils as profusely as from his chin, and the hair was crusted with seaweed and salt crystals. The man in the Cyclops' hand was a local Rhodian farmer.

"BACK TO THE HARBOR!" CALLED JASON. HIS WORDS RANG LIKE A SWORD STRIKING A SHIELD. GONE

"What is this place?"

"This is the island of Rhodes."

"Good fellow. Now tell me, is there a band of wandering sailors,or adventurers who call themselves heroes near here?"

"Yes, yes. I have heard tell-tales of a ship in port. They are captained by a great hero."

"What is the name of the captain?"

"I don't know. I don't go to town."

"You have heard of a band of adventurers, but you have not heard his name?" The giant Cyclops squeezed the man's ribs.

"I have not heard his name! I swear!"

"I asked for his name, little man!" Polyphemos felt little poppings in his hand. "I shan't ask again."

"It's nobody. I know! I swear!" shouted the farmer.

Nobody! His old enemy! Polyphemos smiled. Truly the gods had been kind.

"Now, little man," said the Cyclops, "your last task shall be to direct me to this harbor."

"I have a fence to mend!" said the man.

Polyphemos had herded goats before the blinding. He understood the farmer, he truly did, but the candle of pity that flickered in his breast had never been bright, and its faint flame had been altogether extinguished at the moment Nobody had pricked his eye. Polyphemos had always been cruel, but that day he became pitiless. As light could not enter the window of his eye, so light could not warm his soul.

He gave the farmer a squeeze and felt a crunch.

"Never mind the fence, little man. Direct me to the harbor."

IN WHICH THE ARGONAUTS SPY THE CYCLOPS

The *Argo's* repairs were done at last. Jason gathered his Argonauts together and directed them to row out of the harbor and then set sail for the south. Once there had been fifty-five Argonauts. His adventures had whittled that down to thirty. He had lost friends to monsters, to marriage, to villainous kings, and to pursuing the Harpies; in the case of Herakles and his two friends, nobody knew what happened to them. They had wandered off in Mysia and never returned. The *Argo* had waited and waited and finally sailed without them.

Jason knew his mood would improve on the open sea. A stiff breeze and a full sail was all he wanted. The ocean squalls would blow away his gloom.

The ship pulled out of the harbor and the sails went up. The wind plucked and billowed. Jason felt the *Argo* shift beneath his feet as the sails caught the air.

The *Argo* turned south and followed the coast of Rhodes.

They were not long out of port when Atalanta raised an alarm.

"Heya! Heya!" she called. "Look to port!"

"A Cyclops!" said Euphemus. "And this one looks surlier than most. He's headed for the city."

Before the eyes of the crew, a transformation shook Jason's body. The captain's eyes sparkled and his back straightened. Euphemus could have sworn that the stubble on Jason's chin sucked itself back into his skin.

"Back to harbor!" called Jason. His words rang like a sword striking a shield. Gone was the pale drunkard. The hero was back, and he was as mad and gleeful, and no doubt as suicidal as ever.

The Argonauts furled the sail and scrambled to the oars. With mighty heaves, they turned the *Argo* around and rowed back to Mandraki Harbor.

They moved as fast as their oars could take them. Their arms and backs strained and their muscles tautened with the effort. Back when there were fifty-five Argonauts, and one of them was Herakles, they moved so fast that the *Argo's* prow lifted out of the water. Now they were missing many of their oarsmen and they could not keep up. The Cyclops walked with giant strides, and could move directly towards the harbor while the *Argo* had to skirt the outcroppings and reefs around the shore.

Their skin glistened and their beards dripped with sweat and sea spray. When they rounded the point to the harbor, they were flagging; then they saw the Cyclops and their strength returned. Their arms burned and their veins bulged as they pulled into the port to confront the great, hairy monster.

IN WHICH JASON LEARNS HOW TO FLY

The Cyclops laid waste to the town. He smashed cottages and stomped on carts. He tossed donkeys and sent goats flying with a flick of his fingers. He crushed people. He snapped poles. He was destroying Rhodes with his fists.

The Cyclops stumbled into a bakery. He knocked the front wall over and the smell of bread charged his nostrils.

"Time for lunch!" he bellowed. He reached into the bakery, smashed open the oven door, and pulled out trays of bread. The heat did not penetrate the calluses on his fingertips. His fingers were too big to pick out the loaves individually, so he tipped them on the ground and mashed them into a giant mound. Then he took the poor, cracked farmer and wrapped him in the bread.

"No!" cried the farmer. "You promised you'd let me go!"

"I promised that directing me to the harbor would be your last task. And it was."

With that, the Cyclops tossed the squealing farmer into his maw and crunched the bones between his teeth. The soil around Rhodes must be rich, thought the Cyclops. The farmer had a splendid creamy texture.

He sat down, crushing a market stall as he did so, and belched. Then a human voice called to him from the direction of the harbor.

"You there! O brute!" cried the human voice. "Who are you and what do you seek?"

The Cyclops thought the voice sounded familiar. Perhaps it was the typical noise of an angry human, or perhaps it was Odysseus again, after all these years.

He stood and roared at the top of his lungs. The bellow crashed on the pitiful humans around him, who scurried as fast as they could.

"I am Polyphemos, son of Poseidon!"

Jason, on the *Argo*, turned and looked at Euphemus. "Did you hear that?"

Polyphemos, by an extraordinary coincidence, was not just the

WAS THE PALE DRUNKARD, THE HERO WAS BACK...

name of the Cyclops whom Odysseus blinded. Polyphemos was also the name of the dear friend of Herakles who had been abandoned in Mysia. Leaving them behind had been the hardest decision Jason had ever had to make, and the thought of it still stung him.

"Is he mocking me?" asked Jason.

"I don't think he's mocking you," said Euphemus. "It's not an uncommon name."

The Cyclops roared again. He picked up a scuttling townsman and hurled him into the ground. "I have come here to exact divine vengeance."

Jason called out. "Who is it you have come to kill?"

The Cyclops picked up a tailor, snapped him in two, and gulped down one sartorial half after the other. "I have come to kill Nobody!" He sucked his fingers and laughed at his own joke.

Jason spoke to Euphemus grimly. "Now I know he's mocking me. Launch an attack."

Euphemus gave Jason a jaundiced look. "Are you sure you want to do that? He seems unreasonably large, even by Kyklopean standards, and his temper..."

"Either he's mocking me or he's mad. Launch an attack."

Euphemus relayed the order to the crew. The Argonauts snatched up their shields and their swords.

The three best archers loaded a long spear into the deck-mounted euthytonon, set fire to the spear's head, and launched it at the giant. The spear soared through the air, trailing thick oily smoke. It struck the Cyclops in the left shoulder.

The Cyclops roared in pain and confusion. He plucked the spear from his arm and hurled it back. The spear struck the deck of the *Argo* and skidded off into the water, missing everyone and raising a few splinters.

"We're safe in the water here," said Jason. "Fire away."

Another spear curved through the air. The Cyclops heard it coming. He ducked at the last moment and the spear sailed harmlessly past.

The Cyclops picked up a stone the size of a shack and threw it at the *Argo*. The rock plunged into the water just off the bow. Foam sprayed over the deck.

Euphemus pursed his lips.

"So I may have been a little hasty," admitted Jason.

Another stone crashed into the water. A spear shot back. The Cyclops dodged again, then plucked a pine tree and flung it like he was skipping a flat stone. The tree came at the *Argo* in a horizontal spin. Jason and Euphemus heard it whoop-whoop-whooping toward them. The tree crashed into the ship, splintering the mast and tearing ropes and bollards off the ship.

"Oh dear," said a female voice. "I'm hurt. Again."

It was the voice of the *Argo*.

"We must save the *Argo* first," Jason told Euphemus. "Let us leave

the harbor.

[illegible]

[illegible]

sight encouraging.

Jason glanced at [illegible]

[illegible] rock, although "rock" does not do it justice. "Thing" would be a better description. The Cyclops raised the [illegible] head and bellowed. He hurled with all his might.

The rock sailed through the air, trailed [illegible] ...y, but the impact caused a wave that [illegible] ... A [illegible] screamed here and there [illegible] ... or nails and half ended up in the water.

"[illegible] where we are."

"[illegible] again," he said.

"[illegible] ... the *Argo* could [illegible] ... Where are you, little man?" howled the Cyclops.

The giant strode forward and stepped into the [illegible] ... into the water, following the sound of [illegible] ... E[illegible] ... as it deepened, the water only [illegible]

"What is your name, O sea-[illegible]

[illegible] stood up tall on the deck [illegible] ... Jason said, [illegible] ... I [illegible] ... [illegible] ... [illegible] ...

The Cyclops heard Jason's voice and snatched out toward the sound. He clasped his fingers around Jason's leg and lifted him off the deck.

"O little hero, are you the son of [illegible]

"No," said Jason.

"A demigod, perhaps?"

"No."

"No, no, no."

"No."

"No."

"You can change form, like Proteus?"

"No."

"You can fly as the sons of the North Wind?"

Jason hoped it [illegible] ... [illegible] ... upside down by one leg. The task of questioning [illegible] ... this time he had assembled the Argonauts and the [illegible] ... effort Herakles [illegible] ... helping him think.

"I am just a man," [illegible] ... has been lost these long years."

Now *that* was the wrong thing to say.

"You are Nobody's friend?"

[illegible] ... and stamped and [illegible]

"Fly, O Friend of Nobody! Fly!"

[illegible] ... into the air and across Mandraki Harbor.

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

The sensation of air on his body, the sense of lightness, and the [illegible] ... trouble of his body made him feel like an Olympian [illegible] ... Then he felt the world tilt as he reached the peak of his [illegible] ... a shaft of sunlight struck him in the eye. He was reminded [illegible] ... how close the ground and the unforgiving rock of [illegible] ... Jason had a sense of crushing mortality. He had felt that sam[illegible]

"Then tell me your real name, and swear by all you hold dear
Swear by all the seawater from the Pillars of Herakles to the Euxine Sea! Swear by the might of the Skolopendra! Swear by the swift Hippokampoi! Swear by the trident of Poseidon!"

"My name is Sko?, and I do so swear

"May Poseidon hold you to your oath," said Jason

With that, he bunched himself up and kicked at the Kolossal eye The glass eye shattered. Cool blue water gushed over him. It was much saltier than seawater, it stung through puckered eyelids

The nymph flowed down the Kolossus's face and into its mouth She ran into pipes and conduits and spread herself through valves and gears She blended into the veins and sinews of the Kolossus

The giant statue, built out of the abandoned siege engines of Demetrius, creaked and shuddered, then moved The metal came alive It took a step, shaking the entire city

The nymph's voice echoed in the giant statue. "At last! The metal is a weapon once more!"

Jason, his grip faltering, realized that he told the nymph to save the *Argo* and neglected to foreswear her to save him. He lost his hold and tumbled into space As he fell, he smacked his forehead repeatedly with his good hand and said, "Stupid, stupid, stupid!" all the way down

IN WHICH TWO GIANTS BATTLE

The Cyclops had the ship cornered

The *Argo* shifted this way and that, changing direction as fast as its oarsman could row, just eluding the Cyclops' reach

"Hard to port, fellows! Hard to port!" cried the *Argo*

The Cyclops lunged again and knocked the ship hard enough to tilt it

"That was close!" said the *Argo*. "Back, boys!"

The Argonauts pulled back and forth and the enraged Cyclops swung his fists. So far the ship had evaded those fists, but the Cyclops had pushed it back farther and farther and now it was running out of harbor

The Cyclops lunged, and this time his hands held fast on wood He brushed aside the oars and picked up the ship in both hands Argonauts dived off the ship, and those who did not were thrown free The Cyclops lifted the ship above his head and heaved a double overhand throw that sent the *Argo* spinning across the harbor

"Oh my!" said the *Argo* as it tumbled. "Oh calamity!"

Just before the ship shattered on the rocky shore, an enormous metal hand reached down and caught it. Wood cracked and splinters flew, but the hull and main beam held. The *Argo* was intact The Kolossus set the ship back in the water

The blind Cyclops was puzzled. Why was there no crash? The ship must have dashed itself on the rocks by now

He heard a deep rumbling sound, then another, like the footsteps of Atlas

Now his curiosity was piqued

He heard metal sliding and clunking. He heard an ethereal female voice singing a war song- *Alala! Alala!*

THE CYCLOPS FELT HIMSELF EVAPORATING; HE TOOK

This struck him as peculiar. He tried to visualize what was happening but failed.

Then a ten-foot wave crashed on his chest

"Zeus's whiskers!" he said. "This cannot augur well!"

Two hands gripped him around the waist and lifted him to the sky much as he had lifted the Rhodian farmer. The Cyclops struggled, but the hands held him tight The giant metal hands began to squeeze

"O Father! Aid me!" cried the Cyclops

The Kolossus gripped tighter. The Cyclops felt his innards being crushed. He posited a little of his lunch. The taste of half digested human flesh filled his mouth. He knew that without the aid of the Gods, he would surely die

"Lord Poseidon! Your son calls you! I shall be slain without you!"

The Kolossus came to a halt. It held the Cyclops up to the sky. From within the bronze giant, Sko? the nymph stared at the hairy creature

"What did you say, Cyclops?" Sko?'s voice echoed inside the bronze skull

"The son of Lord Poseidon calls for vengeance!" he said

The son of Poseidon! She had sworn an oath on Poseidon to kill Poseidon's child!

"Aryeeeee!" she wailed, for she was in trouble either way.

IN WHICH AN EARTHQUAKE SETTLES THE QUARREL

Lord Poseidon, the Green God, herdsman of whales, lord of the seas, bringer of storms, and shaker of the earth, heard his son's cries. He stretched his briny limbs. Lord Poseidon sent an earthquake to destroy the bronze giant

Rhodes trembled. The harbor quivered. Waves danced and crashed along the harbor wall.

The Kolossus shook. Bolts unwound. Rivets sheared. Gears slipped. The Kolossus vibrated to pieces. Plates and levers flew apart and sowed the ground with metal seeds. The giant cracked at the knees and toppled over. Still holding the Cyclops, the bronze hands fell, only to spring apart when they struck the ground.

The Cyclops was free from the grip at last.

He tried to move, but his legs were as stone. The Cyclops lay among the wreckage, blinded by Odysseus, and now broken-backed. His fury surged within him, deeper and stronger than ever before.

Polyphemos was an aficionado of cruel thoughts. There was a curse he had been mulling over and honing. He had been saving it for just this sort of moment, and it would be a waste to die with the curse unspoken.

"O Father!" cried the Cyclops as he died. "Grant me my last desire. Curse the mortal Jason who sails the *Argo*. Curse him to die by the hand of his dearest boon!"

Over on the shore, the Argonaut known as Euphemus dragged himself out of the harbor; as he did so, he heard the Cyclops' dying curse.

"Damn that Jason!" said Euphemus. "How many times have I told him not to give his name to spirits and daimons?"

IN WHICH MANY THINGS DIE

The Cyclops felt himself evaporating; he took a deep breath and bellowed to a sky he could not see. It was a scream of pure anger, hot as a sword just out of the forge. As he exhausted his lungs, darkness fell upon him. He shuddered, gave a final twitch, and was water is cold and black and heavy. She saw a flash of light, and then another, and then a field of sparkling stars. Out of the depths, flailing toward her, were thousands of wormfish, their skins flashing and sparking in the abyss and their tiny, bloodsucker jaws gaping ..

The Kolossus lay strewn on the shore and in the shallows, a heap of twisted metal and bent fingers. Its crown was warped. The Rhodians gathered the metal in a pile where the statue once stood. It was beyond rebuilding.

The metal lay there until the Arabs conquered Rhodes, 850 years later. The Age of Wonders had passed. The Arabs collected the metal and sold it to a Syrian trader who needed 900 camels to haul the scrap away. The metal was once a weapon, once a statue of Helios, and then the Syrian trader carted it off to be melted down once more and lost to history.

So it was that the Cyclops died, the Kolossus was destroyed, and Sko? was devoured in the Deep. As for Jason, who despaired at the fading of the Age of Heroes, what of him?

When Euphemus pulled him out of the harbor, Jason was bloodied and half drowned. His arm was broken and his ribs jutted out of his chest.

"How is the *Argo*?" Jason coughed.

"She floats," said Euphemus.

Jason chortled. He clapped his good hand on his thigh.

"How can you be merry?" asked Euphemus. "Your bones are broken, we have lost another four Argonauts, our ship needs repairs—again!—and the son of Poseidon has cursed you to die by your greatest boon."

"My greatest boon would be the *Argo*. I can't think of a better way to die."

"Haven't I told you not to give your real name to witches, demigods, spirits, and sons of gods?"

"It's nothing," said Jason.

"We've relied on the patronage of Poseidon. Now you go and kill his son."

"Calm yourself," said Jason, but Euphemus was not done.

"If you absolutely had to outrage a god, then why Poseidon? You could have offended Kyametes or Argos Panoptes. You'd have no trouble avoiding beans or Zeus's white heifer. But Poseidon? A sailor cursed by Poseidon? What madness!"

Jason roared with laughter. He was in a delirium. Euphemus shook his head in astonishment.

"What is the jest? I swear I cannot see it."

Jason reached up with his good arm and patted the helmsman's face.

"Euphemus, Euphemus, I've been cursed by a god. Rejoice! We're back in the hero trade."

IN WHICH THE ARGO SAILS TO THE END OF ITS AGE

The *Argo* sailed out of Mandraki Harbor on a glorious day with a light wind filling its sails. The Argonauts had not finished their repairs and Jason's bones had still not set, but the *Argo* ached to

A DEEP BREATH AND BELLOWED TO A SKY HE COULD NOT SEE. IT WAS A SCREAM OF PURE ANGER...

on his way to meet the ferryman with the full expectation of a discounted passage.

Sko? the nymph flowed out of the wreckage and into the harbor. She hoped to sneak away without the Green God noticing, but as soon as she reached the open sea she was caught in a vortex that sucked her deep into the Middle Sea, away from the light and the warmth of the shallows she had inhabited since the Chaos coalesced. Deeper and deeper she was drawn, down to where the feel the Middle Sea under her hull.

The Argonauts left Rhodes behind them, they left the shards of the Kolossus, they left the tall, stone heaped grave of the Cyclops, they left the newlydredged harbor mouth; they turned south for Libya. The Sun God had escaped his metal cage and was back in the sky.

So it was that the *Argo* sailed, with the angry Green God seething beneath its keel, unto the end of the Age of Wonders. ❧

THE TRANSITION FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD CAN BE HARD TO ACCEPT. BUT IS IT EVER EASY?

WHEN THE DRAGON FALLS

BY PATRICK SAMPHIRE ■ ILLUSTRATION BY JOSH BRADIGAN

1. Tam found the fossil jutting from the crumbling slope above the lake.

The day was hot, the air thick with humidity and gnats. Chasing along the trails had left Tam red faced and sweaty. So he thrust through the tangle of hawthorn and started down the slope towards the glass-flat lake.

The fossil was in full view. The slate had slipped away, and the long, fossilised bone stared up at him.

The others gathered around quickly.

"A dragon," gasped seven-year-old Rosie, wide-eyed. She was the youngest of them, and she had tagged along all morning like a burr in a dog's tail.

"A dinosaur," Josh said. At thirteen, a full year older than Tam, Josh knew everything.

Tam wasn't so sure. He didn't know what it was, but he did know one thing. He had found it. It was his.

Lisa rolled her eyes and stepped over the fossil. "Are we going swimming or not?" Her long hair was stuck to her sweaty neck.

"Not yet," Tam said, dropping to his knees. The fossilised bone ridged from a bed of dark grey slate. The same bed disappeared beneath the loose scree a couple of yards further up the slope. Tam brushed the fragments away with his hand. "There could be more of it."

"God, who cares?" Lisa said. "It's just a bone."

2. There were sounds in the night and shapes that flitted across Tam's peripheral vision, and lights that blinked and were gone before he could focus on them. *Bats chasing fireflies across the lake*, he told himself. But he got up from his sweat-damp sheets and crossed the room to the window, and watched the flickering lights and flitting shapes and listened to the sounds, because they might not be. They still might not be.

3. "Who's for swimming?" Tam's dad said.

Rosie jumped up from the breakfast table, sending eggshell scattering across the wood. "Me. Me. I'm going to wear my mermaid costume and swim *under* water for a mile."

Tam's dad laughed.

Anyone else? How about you, Tam? Lisa? Josh?"

They all nodded.

Good," Tam's dad said, rubbing his hands. "It's going to be a scorcher. We'll swim and play football and see who can build the biggest sandcastle."

Tam's mom eased herself from the table. "Not me and Dan," she said. "We're going for a hike."

"Again, Mama?" Tam's dad said.

Tam's mom tightened her lips. "Yes, again. We *like* hiking. At least Dan doesn't just sit around all day letting himself get fat."

"Mama."

Rosie pushed in between them. "Can I come hiking too, Mom? Oh, please."

"No, petal," Tam's mom said. "You go to the beach with your father."

Rosie's face fell, her round cheeks pouted out. Tam knew what would happen next. Tears and a tantrum and a day of sulks. "Why not?" Rosie said.

"You couldn't keep up. Not where we're going."

"Yes I could I—"

Tam's dad scooped Rosie up. "The lake'll be more fun, rosebud." He rubbed his greying beard against her neck until she giggled. The he looked across at Josh and Lisa's mom. "Just you, me, and the kids, Annie. Again."

4. "Why does Mommy keep going for hikes with your daddy?" Rosie said.

Josh splashed water at her. "You're too young to understand. You're just a kid."

I am not!" Rosie shrieked, her face turning red. "*You* don't know *either*."

Tam glanced up the beach to where his dad was sitting a couple of feet from Josh and Lisa's mom. They were talking quietly, staring out over the silver-rippled lake, arms wrapped around

their own knees, not touching, not looking at each other

Tam knows," Josh said. "He's not a sprat anymore. Don't you Tam?"

Tam felt his cheeks redden. "Of course," he said, furious that he didn't. "I'm not a kid." He splashed towards the shore. "It's too hot down here. I'm going to ask if I can go and look at my fossil."

5. The fossil was dark grey on dark grey rock, but Tam could see it clearly, nonetheless. When he ran his fingers over it, he could feel the grain in the ancient bone impression. A bit at a time, he cleared away loose stone and dirt with his fingers.

The bone was thicker than his arm, and the exposed section was as long as Tam if he lay down and stretched his arms over his head. It must have been an enormous beast, whatever it had been. And still the bone sank into the slope.

He stuck his fingers into a crack in the slate and tried to lever it up and snap it off.

His nail bent back, and Tam let out a pained gasp. A drop of blood welled from beneath the nail. Tam watched, fascinated, as it fell from his finger onto the fossil and spread along the grain.

The fierce sun beat on his bare neck and thin T-shirt. Sweat dripped over his nose and into his mouth.

It *could* be a dragon," Rosie said.

Tam looked up. His little sister came slipping and sliding down the scree slope, still in her swimsuit with the little mermaid wave ing from it.

"Maybe," Tam said. "Does Dad know you're here?"

They're *all* coming," Rosie said. "Dad says you've been here for too long, and it's time for lunch. You've been *hours*."

Tam took one last look at the fossil. Where it entered the rock, it seemed to widen slightly, as though the bone was coming to an end.

6. "I dreamed about the dragon," Rosie said. She was tucked up in her bed, her sheet pulled up tight beneath her chin.

When?" Tam said.

"Last night," Rosie said. "And when I woke up, there were dragons flying over the lake."

Tam ruffled her hair. "You were still dreaming."

"No. I wasn't. If you'd been awake you would have seen them too, but you weren't. You were probably snoring with your mouth open wide to catch the moths."

"Go to sleep," Tam said.

"I will," Rosie said. "And I'll dream of the dragon again. It was defending its eggs against the fairies. *That's* how it got caught and died. The fairies have got teeth like pins, and there's thousands of them, and they like to bite. But the eggs hatched and the babies swam away while the mommy dragon stopped the fairies from catching them."

7. Tam dreamed, but in his dream there was no dragon. The dinosaur was vast, longer than a bus, heavier than a whale. Its long neck arced over the swamp, dipped down to strip the leaves from a low fern. Its eyes, small and half blind, did not see the quick movements among the deep vegetation beside the swamp, but Tam did. He wanted to shout out. He wanted to tell it to fly and to breathe fire but it could not. It was only a dinosaur, a slow, dull dinosaur.

You're a dragon," Tam yelled, while his sleeping body dripped sweat. "You're a dragon."

Something came rushing from the vegetation, something smaller, with tearing teeth and long jaws. Its teeth sliced into the dinosaur's leg, ripped. The dinosaur let out a moan like a slow foghorn and took a plodding step forward. Its massive tail lashed around, but by then there were a dozen more predators upon it, shredding, slicing, biting. Blood slipped into the stagnant Precambrian water.

8. "Do you remember how we caught a fairy last year?" Rosie said.

Tam wiped his sleeve across his forehead. The heat was near unbearable, the humidity total. When he tugged at the splintering rock, his fingers slipped.

"No, we didn't," Tam said. "There's no such thing as fairies."

"We did," Rosie insisted. "You're just saying that so Josh and Lisa

won't laugh at you. It was floating through the woods near the stream. You caught it by the back of its neck so it couldn't bite you, and you made it give you a wish. You wished you could be all grown up like Josh and Lisa. That was silly. Why would anyone want to be grown up and *boring?*"

Now Tam remembered. It had twisted and turned and darted, even though there had been no breeze. He had chased it and leapt and laughed and then trapped it between his fingers. He had breathed upon it, kissed it, wished.

"It was just thistledown. It's a seed. I learned that in school. We pretended it was a fairy. It was a kids' game."

9. He cracked away the years-old slate with a knife he had stolen from the kitchen. The large bone ended, but there were other fossils in the same bed of slate. There was something that could have been a claw, and some thinner bones that stretched back further again, into the slope.

"That's its wing," Rosie said confidently from where she lounged higher on the slope.

"Go and swim," Tam said.

Rosie made a face. "Dad made Mom go to the beach with him today, and she's being all grumpy. It's no fun. Anyway, I want to see the dragon."

10. He had never noticed how they looked at each other before, but he noticed at dinner that night. His mom kept sneaking glances at Josh and Lisa's dad. Tam's dad was growing steadily more pale. His knife and fork clattered and clashed on the willow-pattern china.

Rosie didn't notice any of it. She just kept chattering on about her dragon.

Tam's dad slammed down his cutlery. "For Heaven's sake, Rosie, shut up."

"Don't take it out on her," Tam's mom flared up.

Rosie burst into tears.

"Rosie!" both parents snapped.

11. Tam tucked Rosie into bed.

"Why are Mommy and Daddy being so mean?" she said.

"They're having a few problems," Tam said. He brushed a hand over her light hair. "Nothing to worry a sprat like you. It'll all be all right." It had to be. Tam curled himself up beside Rosie on the bed and closed his eyes.

"If *I* was a dragon," Rosie said, "I wouldn't let anyone be mean to anyone, and if they were I'd gobble them up."

12. A warm breeze woke Tam. At first he thought it was just the stifling night air, but then it seemed more than that. It felt like heat from rock in the midday sun. The lake would have cooled quicker than the surrounding earth. The breeze should have been cool.

Strange light strobed the cabin, cold sounds shivered into his bones.

He pulled up his sheet. He didn't want to know, wanted to know.

The angry heat was like a fever.

That was all it was. A fever. No more.

13. "I saw your mom with my dad last night," Lisa said. "Outside."

They were standing in the shallows of the lake, up to their waists in the warm, still water. The hard sun beat upon Tam's bare back.

"Do you want to know what they were doing?" Lisa said.

"What?" Tam said, not wanting to know.

Lisa's tight arms wrapped around him. "This." She kissed him.

14. He worked like one of the grey-faced, angry, voiceless Chips of slate flew from the screwdriver he had taken from the cabin. *Din-o-saur, dra-gon, din-o-saur, dra-gon.* His blows hammered down to the beat of the syllables.

The slate was hard but brittle, cracking along its faults, coming away with every blow.

A larger bone was emerging. His screwdriver should have shattered and scarred it, turned the fossil into unrecognisable fragments. But fate and need and fury guided his hand. Inch by inch, the giant fossil emerged. Inch by too-slow inch.

15. A small hand tugged Tam awake. Night was thick upon the cabin. The shy moon flirted behind slipping clouds.

"I want to show you something," Rosie whispered.

"Go back to bed," Tam muttered, turning over.

Rosie persisted. "You need to see it. You need to believe." Then, "I can stay here all night."

Tam sighed. He swung himself out of bed, pulled on a T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers.

Rosie was still dressed in her nightshirt. A dry leaf was caught on it. Her bare feet were dirty.

"Where are we going?"

Rosie held up a finger to her lips. "Shh. Outside." She turned and padded from the room. Tam followed her.

She was quick in the night, like a will-o-the-wisp, as she threaded her way up the slope behind the cabin.

Eventually, they reached the ridge. Rosie motioned him down. He dropped into a crouch.

"There." Rosie pointed.

Through the dark trees, sharp lights slipped and rose.

"And there." She directed his gaze up.

Black shapes moved across the face of the moon, like the flap of giant wings.

"The fairies are hunting the dragons again," Rosie whispered. "They want to steal the gold in their eyes and the gems in their scales."

Still the lights flowed, hurrying through the trees, rising towards the sky, red and white slivers in the night. Tam heard a breath like wind in the trees. The treetops shook and bent. For a second, the moon was obscured. Sharp teeth and scales glittered in the sky. Tam dared not breathe. His heart thundered like the hooves of fairy steeds, like—

Raised, angry, adult voices came from the cabin behind them, then footsteps on floorboards. The cabin door slammed. Car doors opened, thumped shut. The engine, starting loud, headlights springing on, the engine fading into the distance.

Tam stood there, staring down at the cabin, his eyes wide and spilling tears. "Mom?" he said.

Rosie tugged at his T-shirt. "You have to see. You have to believe."

Tam turned. He took Rosie's hand. "I'm not a child anymore, Rosie," he said. "I'm sorry." He squeezed her pudgy hand. "Look."

The lights through the trees were car lights on a nearby road, climbing up the valley side. The wings in front of the moon were simply gathering clouds. "I'm sorry," Tam said again.

16. The weather broke that night. The heat shattered before the pounding rain.

In Tam's dream, the dragon fell, like a dark sheet from the sky, tumbling, twisting, bunching. And then it was gone.

17. In the sad, unbearding, journeys of the day, Tam walked from the cabin, where his father and Josh and Lisa's mother sat, unspeaking and hollow. He followed the trail that led up through the trees, around the lake. He pushed through the hawthorn thicket and came out onto the cracked slate slope. Beyond, the lake lay flat and glassy.

He started down the slope.

The bed of slate that had held his fossil had broken off in the night and fallen into the deep lake. The fossil of the dinosaur was gone.

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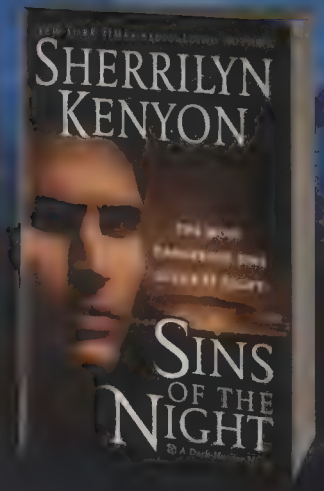

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By Eric T. Baker

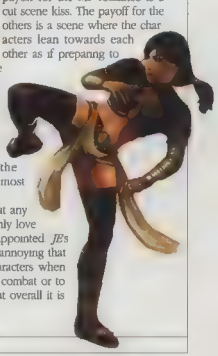
The latest RPG's bring action, adventure, and more.

Set in a mythic China, ***Jade Empire*** is the latest game from Bioware, the company who designed the first *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* game. Like *KotOR*, *JE* is a first person role playing game for the Xbox with an epic story line, multiple endings, and spoken lines for all the non-player characters in the dialog trees. Unlike *KotOR*, *JE* has action combat system instead of a turn-based one, allows only two characters in the party at a time, and has no crafting system for upgrading weapons. There is an alignment system in *JE*, but instead of being light vs. dark, it is mutual support vs. self-sufficiency.

ABOVE: Step into a world of half humans in the latest D&D *supplement,* Races of Destiny. *RIGHT: Mythic China awaits in* Jade Empire.

Players chose from one of six character models and then use that character to take the role of a young, promising martial arts student at a rural academy whose teacher reveals to them that they were born with a dangerous destiny. Abruptly cast into the world, the player's character sets about gaining followers and solving quests while slowly discovering that the fate of the Empire is in their hands. Many twists and turns of plot and lots and lots of kung-fu battles ensue.

Among the many subplots in the game is a romance one. The player's character can be male or female, and the possible romance plots are MF, MFF (ultimately the player has to chose one woman or the other), FF, and MM. The payoff for the MF romance is a cut scene kiss. The payoff for the others is a scene where the characters lean towards each other as if preparing to kiss, and then the camera cuts to the player's character waking up alone. The interactions with the NPCs are in many ways the heart of *JE*, but the romances are the most compelling thread.



It is a safe bet that any one who loved *KotOR* will at least like and enjoy *JE*. Those who only love Jedis and who hate the action combat will be the only ones disappointed. *JE*'s combat system is no harder than *KotOR*'s turn-based one, but it is annoying that characters can't run during combat. Instead, players jump the characters when they need to cover a lot of ground in a hurry, either to engage in combat or to dodge it. There are a few such minor annoyances in the game, but overall it is well worth the price of admission.

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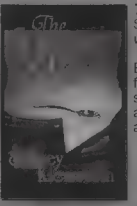

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Another action combat system is the meat of ***Untold Legends: Brotherhood of the Blade*** from Sony Online for the brand new Sony PSP. Billed as a hack-and-slash RPG and set in a medieval fantasy background, players select one of four classes and then battle their way through 150 different kinds of enemies and several bosses stocked on 100 levels. Getting started is simplified when playing either the Knight or Berserker classes because they are primarily melee fighters so it is easier to just dive right in after the monsters. The Alchemist and Druid classes aren't really that different, but they are geared more towards using their special abilities first.

The most exciting thing about *UL:BotB* is that it is on the PSP, which means that it can be played anywhere and yet has Play Station quality graphics. In addition, up to four people can play it at once, wirelessly. The players have to be close enough for the PSPs to link, but beyond that limit, they can be anywhere, killing monsters as a group, everyone with their own screen, with no wires to keep track of.

The game's graphics are well suited for the size and capabilities of the PSP screen. There is a "further back" third person view that is just battles, but there is also a close-in perspective for when players want to examine the details of the world.

Untold Legends has a big "what's going to happen next?" factor going for it. The quests properly paced and well balanced in difficulty to the expected level of the hero. The plot stays very linear, but that just makes getting to the fights easier. It is well done how the player's character grows in the eyes of the NPCs from the winner of what had been a ceremonial position of Guardian, to being looked at as the bearer of a critical position just as the danger is developing. Little touches like the "Recalling Stone," which takes the player back to town and then back to the dungeon so that they can do their shopping and crafting without long, dull marches across the game world make *UL:BotB* a mature, faced paced, very enjoyable game.

Atelier Iris: Eternal Mana from NIS America is the first of two Japanese strategy role-playing games new this month. These games get the term "strategy" added to their description because they combine turn based combat with elaborate crafting systems that make the game play as much about managing resources and careful battlefield tactics as it is about choosing the right branches of the dialog trees. This is the genre from which the *Final Fantasy* series was born. *AI EM* is billed, for instance, as a game of alchemy rather than one of adventure.

The alchemist and hero of *AI EM* is Klein Kiesling, a young man who has learned the basics of alchemy from his grandmother and is now wandering the South Esviore region of the world of Regallzine, looking for greater knowledge, more elements, and new mana. Ultimately, accompanied by various companions he meets along the way, Klein will manage to open the long sealed Gate of Hermil and make it to the legendary city of Avenberry. Even there, however, Klein's adventures will be barely half over as he traces the origins of the growloon, tiny creatures who somehow attract monsters. The more growloon, the more monsters, and the more dangerous for humans. The growloon problem is so bad that the once-united kingdom of Esviore is now fractured into tiny fiefdoms.

ABOVE: Careful planning and resource management will yield big gains in the Japanese RPG Atelier Iris: Eternal Mana. ***RIGHT: Top-notch storytelling drives Atlus's newest role-player,*** Stella Deus: The Gate of Eternity. ***BELOW:*** Races of Destiny.

The item system of *AI-EM* allows Klien to create over 300 items from the various elements that he collects traveling about the game world. For the crafting, he uses the help of the 14 different manas (small spirit creatures who themselves can be transformed into alternate selves) he encounters. He gets the elements by bashing just about every loose item on the maps with his special wand, thereby transforming them to their component elements. This collecting of elements and creation of items are not passive, wait-for-combat activities. They are both key to moving around the maps, one used for clearing paths and the other being used for creating them.

The second Japanese strategy RPG is ***Stella Deus: The Gate of Eternity*** from Atlus USA. This game is even more traditional than the very traditional *AI EM* in that while *SD:GoE* also has a fully fleshed system of item creation, it reserves most of its complexities for the battlefield. Each character has its special attacks and special skills, which the player will constantly improve upon, add to, and modify by leveling and items. Success in battle comes from meshing all these elements in ways that guard against the enemy's abilities while maximizing the number of devastating team attacks that the player's characters can carry out.

Set in the world of Fortuna, *SD:GoE* has a much darker background than *AI-EM*. A mist called the Miasma has been spreading across the world, swallowing everything it covers. The people deal with this threat by adopting a religion of fatalism, passively waiting for their deaths. Their faith is tested, however, when Lord Dignus and his evil generals conquer the remaining lands. As the game opens, Lord Dignus is forcing Viser, another alchemist, to craft an answer to the Miasma. Viser's answer requires the hunting down of spirits, a job that falls to Viser's friend and the game's hero, Spero.

Both games feature hand-drawn, 2D art and animation with impressive cut scenes in anime style. Each game has numerous original and interesting characters, good and bad, mortal and spirit, intelligent and feral. *SD:GoE* has an edge in story telling, but *AI:EM* is lighter and more charming. These are both good, enjoyable games that give value for the money. The choice for players is whether they prefer the "poke into every corner and brew every potion" play of *AI EM* or the "dominate the evolving chessboard of battle" play of *SD:GoE*.

In the world of paper and dice role-playing games, ***Werewolf the Forsaken*** is the latest book in White Wolf's reboot of their *World of Darkness* background. The book itself is a setting supplement; players will need the base *World of Darkness* rulebook to play, as well as some 10-sided dice and a couple friends. White Wolf's previous werewolf game pitted eco warrior lupines against the (usually corporate) forces of environ

mental destruction. That background is now gone. In this book, the adversaries are mostly animalist spirits and the werewolves are the guardians who stand between the material and the spirit worlds.

The emphasis in this version of *Werewolf* is to make lupine characters that are playable in a group and over a long campaign. Thus werewolves may transform regardless of the moon's phase, and they are almost always in control of their behavior. They are big, tough, and powerful, but their powers separate them from humanity and make them targets for a wide variety of spirit foes, and even a different race of werewolves. Players' characters have lots of reasons to cleave to each other, and to interact with the world around them.

There is a ton of useful information in the *WfF* book, particularly the chapters on their enemies and on how to run a campaign with the supplement. The most welcome section is the second appendix, which lays out a sample setting for a *WfF* campaign including maps and non-player characters with stats. A game master could run a game with friends with just the information in this book and a minimal amount of prep work.

It turns out the humans and the half-humans are the ***Races of Destiny*** in Wizards of the Coast's new *Dungeons and Dragons* supplement. While other races in the *D&D* setting have greater inherent powers or much longer histories or both, it is the races of man who have come to dominate the worlds and to whom the future seems to belong. This 192-page, hard cover, full color supplement provides background and campaign information on humans, half-elves, half orcs, and the brand new Illumians.

The Illumans are a centuries-old race of humans who have chosen to undertake the ritual of World Made Flesh: they have sacrificed part of their humanity to become the embodiment of certain magical glyphs. Unless consciously suppressed, these glyphs float about the Illumians' heads and grant them special abilities. Illumans forgo cities and kingdoms and instead live in isolated cabals among their own kind. From these holdings, they range out to engage in the affairs of other men.

The other races covered in the book are Aasimar (half celestial), Dopplegangers, Half-Ogres, Mongrel Folk (half-lots of races), Sea Kin (underwater humans), Sharakim (cursed humans), Skaths (chameleons), Tieflings (half-infernal), and Underfolk (underdark dwellers). These are examples of how humans spread and of the races that live among them when they do. They are intended more as NPCs than player characters. The rest of the book is taken up with prestige classes, new feats and skills, new spells and psionics, and a discussion on how to run campaigns centered on humans that deviate from the guidelines laid out in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*.

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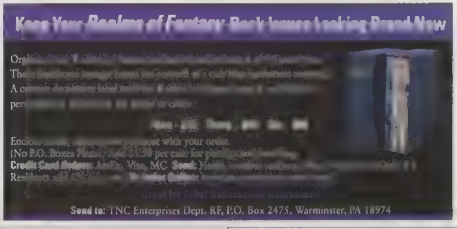
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Movies

Continued from page 13

says. "I actually made a list of things that we could not have in the movie, like no destruction of famous landmarks, no General pushing ships around the map with a big stick, no unnecessary beating up of New York City. We wanted to be near these events but not involved directly in them. That was the idea. And that all came from the book."

In a brief introduction to his book, Wells alluded to the British Empire as a conquering force that wiped out indigenous peoples, citing Tasmania specifically. It's no coincidence that his Martians are a conquering force that threaten to wipe out the human race.

Isaac Asimov once commented that Wells's Martians turned the tables by colonizing the world's greatest colonial power. In TIME's Great Books series, Leonard Nimoy comments that Wells' novel taps into a universal fear of "them" and the concept of "the other"—anyone who's different. When H.G. Wells wrote *War of the Worlds*, the English feared invasion by Germany. When Orson Welles aired the radio play, Americans feared invasion by Germany or Japan. When the first movie version was made, Americans feared the Soviet Union. Spielberg's version is bound to shine a light on modern-day fears. At the same time, the script takes a sensitive approach to recent history.

"We're never in New York," Koepp says. "We're in New Jersey. Like the book was near London but outside it, we wanted to be near New York but outside it. New York being pummeled by aliens is a cliché by now, and we didn't want to propagate it."

Like Otto, Koepp became involved with the movie when he received a phone call from Spielberg asking if he'd like to write the script. It wasn't the first time Spielberg had called—Koepp penned the scripts for *Jurassic Park* and its sequel, *The Lost World*.

It was great to work with Steven again," Koepp says. "Because I'm a little older, I felt like I was a better writer this time than I had been in the past—I'm a little older, a little calmer, and a little less intimidated by his persona. It's hard to work sometimes when you know you're in the room with a legend. And this time he was more the director."

Otto likens working with Spielberg to working with Peter Jackson. "There were a lot of similarities," she says. "They both have a huge knowledge of filmmaking. They have similar temperaments. They're quiet, respectful, very kind people. A lot of directors I've enjoyed working with are very gentle people."

As gentle as Spielberg might be, don't expect any sweet, ET like aliens this time around.

Expect to be scared.

Broken Tickers

continued from page 62

"Give him some time," Ma said quietly, a hand touching Sprokly's wrist, easing her back into the porch swing.

Billy stopped behind the vehicle, stared for a moment toward the paint-worn barn that was Grampser's workshop. Sprokly followed his gaze. Was that the barest flicker of a curtained window down there? Billy's fists clenched, he shook his head, and got into the car where Sylvine waited.

Billy said something to Sylvine. The real woman ignored him. Billy spoke again, and even through the dull gleam of the windshield, Sprokly saw Sylvine's idiot stare, blank as the inside of a blizzard. Her brother's shoulders slumped and he started the car. The tires kicked up dust as the vehicle veered in a circle and bumped along the dirt path.

"They gonna be all right?" Sprokly asked.

Ma smiled and squeezed Sprokly's hand. Sprokly marveled at the strength of her mother's grip. It was hard to realize the old woman had been bedridden only yesterday.

"The girl will be fine by the time she gets to school. Won't remember us, of course. You did a pretty good job on her." Ma paused for a sip of moon tea. "Billy's heartbroken. First true love and all, but he'll get over it."

Sprokly nodded. They sat a while longer, watching the horned toads play in the yard. "I guess I should get down to the workshop. Grampser and Pa will want help."

"Stay a while yet." Ma shifted in her seat and regarded Sprokly with a warm, generous smile.

"Heartbroken," Sprokly tested the word in her mouth. She thought of the arguments and stony silence during the last day, Billy's final stare, cold as a Seven Year Norther. She knew what heartbroken meant now, from the inside out. Her vision blurred again but she forced a laugh. "That's kind of like you, Ma. Your heart was broken too."

Ma glanced down at her chest, at the small glass lozenge, all cloudy glowing gold, suspended on a string. The life and energy of the tornado inscribed within the old woman had written the inherent heart problem away.

"Tarnation, Missy," Ma rasped in gentle imitation of Grampser. "You ain't learned nothing that won't fix all these broken tickens?"

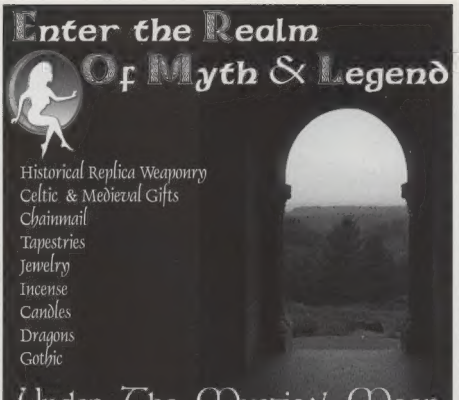
Sprokly frowned and thought for a while. Looking up into Ma's dark brown eyes, she grinned and took her hands.

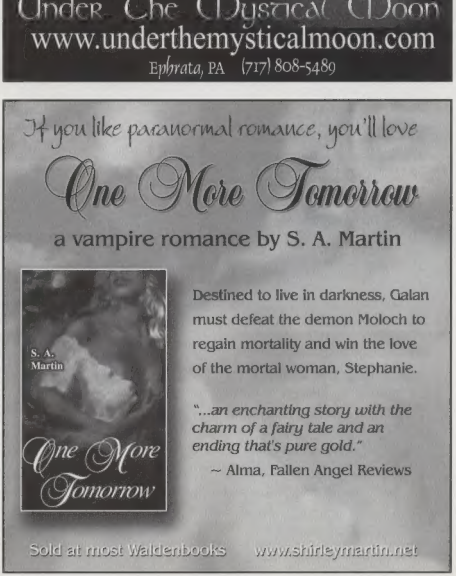
"There's a secret. The Secret of Broken Hearts is to make them strong. Toughen and test them so that whatever happens, they heal quick and a body can get on with life."

"Now how would you do that, young lady?"

Sprokly turned her gaze to the cloud-smeared sunset. Finally, she laughed. "Storms."

Ma leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "You make me proud, girl. Happy birthday!" ❧

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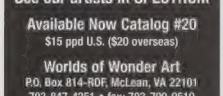
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Statement in the Case

Continued from page 44

No, what I saw were cages. Cages stacked on top of each other, in the darkness. Now, I'm going to tell you what was in those cages. But I want you to remember, I'd been drinking that pálinka. I was probably drunk. Would a sober man have seen a goat with the head of a boy, maybe fifteen, sixteen? Or a girl, but only about three feet tall, and covered with scales? She had gills on the sides of her neck, just like a fish. There wasn't enough room in the cage for her to stand, so she sat there, rocking back and forth like a monkey at the zoo. There was a cage full of snakes, except they had wings, a bunch of them on some of the bigger ones. There wasn't room to fly, but they beat the air with their wings, and hissed at me. There was a hen with only one leg, not on one side as though the other had been chopped off, but right in the middle. When I looked in that cage, I realized where all those Fabergé eggs had come from. Then the goat boy bleated—that was the sound I'd heard—and something in a cage I'd thought was empty, except for what looked like a rubber poncho on the floor, opened its eyes. Its hell of a lot of eyes, all different colors, blue and gray and green. I turned and ran out of that basement, up the stairs and past the counter where István was ringing up a customer. He looked up, startled, as I ran past him and out the door. I didn't stop until I was across the street and smoking a cigarette. I stood there, across the street from the store, until it got dark, smoking most of a pack, not wanting to go home to the empty apartment, not wanting to return to the Apothecary. I think István realized why I had run out of there, because after that customer left he went upstairs to the apartment and sat at the kitchen table with his head in his hands. Yeah, he may have gone down again once, but then he went back to the kitchen. A couple more customers came by, but he didn't answer the bell.

That's how I saw when Ildiko came home, right around six o'clock as I said. She went upstairs and said something to him. When he didn't answer she threw her coat down on the chair, and her purse on top of it. Then she turned on the stove and started cooking dinner.

Now what you want to know is, how did the store burn down, with her body in the basement? I'll tell you what I'm going to swear to in court. I'm going to swear that I saw Ildiko Horvath go down to the store and open the basement door, then go down to the basement. You can see the door through the store window. And I'll swear that I saw István fall asleep on the kitchen table, spilling the bottle of pálinka. Remember, the stove was on. It was a small kitchen—easy enough for some of the pálinka to spill on the flames. That would explain why the firemen smelled peaches. You don't think I could see that far? Check my army record. I was a sniper in Vietnam. My vision's still better than twenty twenty.

Oh, but I wasn't drunk by then. I'd been standing out there about an hour. I'd had plenty of fresh air. All right, so Ildiko had a bruise on her head. Maybe she got that trying to escape the fire. It spread so fast, I barely got István out. Someone should talk to the mayor about these old buildings.

I thought you would find the cages. Of course they were empty. You don't think I actually saw those things? István probably kept the cages for catching raccoons.

But I'm going to tell you something, Sergeant. Off the record. You don't have one of those wires, do you? I've watched cop shows on TV. That's why I wanted to meet here, in the apartment. István Horvath, he wouldn't hurt a fly. Those things—I don't know what they were, but I think he cared about them. Remember the stories he told Eva. I think that's what he really meant, when he talked about the treasures of his country. I mentioned how he let the mice out in the cemetery? Once, when I was sitting there by Eva's grave, I saw her. The scaled girl. She was sitting on the grass by the pond, and sort of humming. And once I saw the biggest bat I've ever seen. Two feet across, it must have been, like a black kite. I don't even want to talk about its eyes. But it was getting dark, so I could have been mistaken.

What if, off the record now, István did start that fire? First, he would have set those things free. Some things shouldn't be in cages. You can understand that, right? You're Polish, your people are from the old country. And Ildiko Horvath? Like I said, István wouldn't hurt a fly. But she wasn't a fly, more like a spider in her web, or a cat waiting for the mouse to come out of its hole. What if, when she went down to the basement, István followed her, with the bottle of pálinka in his hand? What if he showed her the empty cages, then poured what was left in the pálinka bottle over those pieces of lace, and told her he would burn the things in the basement before he'd let her sell them? And then he lit a match. I figure she would fly at him with those red nails of hers. If he hit her with the bottle, well, that's self-defense. It wouldn't be his fault that the fire spread so quickly. But hey, I'm just telling a story. There are no windows in the basement. If something happened down there, I wouldn't have seen it, even if I wanted to. Anyway, I tell you, whatever she got she deserved. And I think Eva would agree.

But that's between you and me. István's not talking. I told him, this is America. We have rights in this country. So I'm your only witness. As far as I'm concerned, the fire was an accident. And I'm not going to say different, not if I have to swear on the Bible, so help me God. ❧

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